THE STONES OF KHOR

DAVID WHITELAW

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The Stones of Khor

By DAVID WHITELAW ::

Author of "The Little Hour of Peter Wells," "The Impostor," "Pirate's Gold," etc. :: ::

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The Stones of Khor

CHAPTER I

DURING the whole of that February day the fog had been creeping up from the low lying lands of the estuary. A yellow, persistent monster it was, cloying, suffocating, an invader that, although repelled time and again by the wind and rain that scudded down from the north-west, had advanced steadily until, with the coming of night and the dying down of the wind, the metropolis lay conquered and at its mercy.

The smother hung in heavy banks over the slow moving river, shrouding the leafless trees of the Embankment, muffling the dull whine of the trams as they slid ghostlike through the murk. Here and there little ochre splashes told of the palatial hotels that lay but a few steps across the gardens, but, beyond the parapet was nothing but a chasm of gloom from which far, far below, came the sibilant wash of Father Thames and the occasional muted sob of a syren echoing somewhere out in the unknown.

A world of shadows, a world of strange contrasts. Here, by the parapet's edge where Egypt's column raises its head in sculptured pomp, the derelicts of a great city huddled together shapelessly upon the benches, seeking merely a few short hours of oblivion, a few hours snatched from the tragedy of living. And, but a few, a very few paces away, where splashed the ochre lights, the favoured ones of fortune seeking to put off the hour when they, too, from sheer weariness, must put aside their toys and forget their particular and very desirable world in sleep.

And, separating them, the wraith-like line of trams, feeling their way cautiously through the smother, bearing workers to their homes across the water.

And as our story deals not with the derelicts nor with the workers, but with the favoured few, we will leave the former to their uneasy slumbers, wishing them better fortune, and step across to the Palm Court of the Savoyard.

For a little while dancing had ceased and the seats upon the raised dais were empty, the saxophone and jazz drums laid aside. In gay chattering little groups the dancers were clustered about the tables refreshing the inner man or woman against the return of the musicians. From the adjacent supper room came little intermittent bursts of laughter and the popping of corks.

In a secluded alcove whose long windows, were the heavy damask curtains to be drawn aside, would have shown the fog-shrouded Embankment, a man and a girl were sitting. Basil Gault and Barbara Manton had not danced much that night, had seemed rather to be more than content to sit just one with the other, spectators rather than participators in the gay doings about them, "I know, Basil," the girl was saying, "but it doesn't make it any the easier, does it?"

The dark head of the man leant lower towards her.

"You're a dear to say it, Babs. I feel a dozen different kinds of a cad when you speak like that. And yet . . . well, frankly, I want to go. It's the chance of a life-time, and, after all, I couldn't let old Merton down."

"He'd send someone else. It wouldn't be letting him down."

"And I'd never have another chance. Reporting flower shows and weddings and things like that for the rest of my natural. I know you don't mean it, Babs."

The girl laughed. "Of course, I don't . . . goose."

Silence fell between them. Barbara was looking out beyond the curtains of the alcove to the chattering groups in the dancing-room. Dancing had begun again, and the strains of a popular one-step came to her ears. For a long while now, she was thinking, there would be no more glidings over the glassy floor of the Savoyard, no more little dinners in Soho or chafing-dish suppers in Chelsea. No more spins in the little Lagonda through the frosty air out to Richmond. . . . It was all very sad.

Basil, for his part, was living over again those wonderful hours of the afternoon when the foreign editor of the *Daily Record* had assigned to him, the youngest cub on his reporting staff, the task of investigating upon the spot certain recent discoveries in the Silwa region of the Arabian Desert, discoveries which by reason of their romantic surroundings and by their suggestion of buried treasure, had roused the wonder not alone of Egyptologists but of the mere man in the street.

It was work after Basil's own heart. Son of Professor Ambrose Gault, the boy had been brought up in an atmosphere that had fostered his inherent love and admiration of the things of past ages. At Charterhouse and later at Oxford, where a paper written in his twentieth year upon the Horbehutet or Winged Disc of Egypt had called forth high praise, the boy had shown an insight that was at times almost uncanny into the life of the dead nations.

Not that I would have you for one moment visualise Basil Gault as a horn-spectacled, dry-as-dust delver into tombs. Far from it. The joy of living was in no way dimmed by the romance of the dead, and had the young man seated in the alcove at the Savoyard been given the opportunity of choosing between the sacred eyes of Horus or the velvet, deep-fringed jewels of Barbara Manton, it would be, so to speak, a million to a hay-seed that his choice would not fall upon the former.

Those velvet jewels were lowered just now, the deep fringes making little shadows as of tiny open fans upon her cheek. Although no word of love had been spoken between them, it had become for Barbara a very usual and a very desirable thing to find Basil Gault not so very far from where she, during the last few months, had happened to find herself; a pleasant thing to her to hear his breezy hail from the little hall-way of her studio flat. And now Fate was calling a halt, and Barbara viewed the coming loneliness with trepidation.

Of course there were other men, many of them, Robert Hassan for instance, who would be only too willing to step into the shoes that Basil would cast off when he would leave for Egypt.

But, somehow, Barbara Manton did not desire this. Metaphorically, she wanted Basil's shoes to be put aside until his return. No other man would fill them quite as he did. Dances, little Soho dinners, and all the other delightful things of the Bohemian world in which she moved and had her being, would go on, she supposed, but it would not be the same. They would have lost their savour. To-night would be the last time that she would be with Basil, the last few dances when she would feel his arm about her. To-night. . . .

To-night. . . . There was something in the air to-night. Somehow the girl felt that this was her moment, that from that hour strange things would come into her life. Love . . . and something rather terrible. She knew, as though it had been told her, that in a little while the man by her side would speak all that was in his heart, all that, woman-like, Barbara had for many a day read in his eyes. Romance was about her. . . . Romance, and, in some subtle way, Mystery. . . .

"There's nothing to be sad about, Babs. Egypt isn't like it was. Even the sheiks are amiable old gentlemen with about as much vice as a kitten. The desert is as safe as Piccadilly. Safer. There's no danger now that the land of the Pharaohs has been mapped out and tacked down by the able Mr. Cook. Besides, it won't be for long."

The girl rose from her seat and smiled down at the eager-faced boy. She held out her arm and motioned towards the entrance to the alcove as the strains of a waltz floated down from the musicians' dais. In a moment they were among the dancers, threading their way gracefully through the throng. To and fro, criss and cross. . . . Robert Hassan, lithe as a steed of his own Arab descent, glided past with Vera Peacock, the girl who rented the big studio beneath her own, upon his arm. The man flashed a smile at Barbara and was gone, lost in the maze of dancers. Robert Hassan had often smiled at Barbara, and yet somehow . . . to-night . . .

Basil had looked up at that moment and had seen the smile. It had angered him, quite unreasonably, his common sense told him, for Hassan was the very best of good fellows, and yet there was an easy familiarity in the man's eyes that irritated him, and for the remainder of the waltz Basil Gault was strangely quiet. But the smile of Robert Hassan had done its work, had provided the spark that had been all that was wanting to set ablaze the furnace that had been smouldering in his heart since that day, three months since, when he had seen the slight little figure of Barbara Manton leaving the room of the fashion editress of the *Record*.

Yes, Barbara's moment had come. As, the dance over, she sat again with Basil in the alcove, listening to the burning words that came from his eager lips, all else was forgotten. The Palm Court of the Savoyard became a scented garden of romance in which her love and herself wandered always and for ever. Hassan passed the opening of the alcove, but he was but a shadow, just Robert Hassan, an acquaintance, friend perhaps. Nothing that could point to him as a serpent in the Eden upon the threshold of which she had that evening set her little foot.

And yet . . . had not Barbara felt that Mystery was that night marching with Romance? Basil, too, had looked up as Robert Hassan passed and had remembered the smile and had felt as though a cloud had for one little moment passed across the face of the sun of his happiness. But he had laughed at his fancies and hoped that Barbara had noticed nothing. After all, surely one was entitled to a little attack of nerves on the most eventful night of one's life.

Barbara could never have rightly told of the latter stages of that evening. She supposed they danced, supposed, too, that so wonderful an occasion would be marked by champagne. So wondrous a whole had it been that details become immaterial. Heaven is not analysed.

But the end of the dream had come when, all but choked by the fog, they had stood beneath the portico of the Savoyard and cajoled and bribed in vain cabmen who lacked the will or the courage or the petrol to pilot them to Chelsea. The courtyard and the Strand beyond were but a realm of yellow cotton wool filled with strange shapes and sounds.

And then from near by had come the soft Southern voice of Robert Hassan. His car was there, just beyond the pillar, and Ali could drive anything through the pit-mirk of Hades itself. He would go bail that within half an hour they would be sitting in Vera's studio brewing coffee as only he, Robert Hassan, could brew it. There would be but little traffic on the Embankment at this hour and in this weather . . . no, really he would not take any sort of refusal whatever. Absolutely none.

For just the space of one tiny moment Basil had hesitated. The memory lingered still of a smile. Nerves. A pretty one to go adventuring into the wilds of the Arabian Desert. The man laughed away his vapours and thanked Hassan warmly. After all, wasn't Robert the very best of fellows, and why should not the very best of fellows smile at his friends ? And there was Ali, imperturbable, sphinx like, standing by the open door of the big Daimler. It would be churlish, not to say stupid to refuse.

It was warm and cosy in the well-lighted limousine, the tightly fitting windows of which had kept at bay the worst of the fog. Slowly, like some great liner edging her way out into the darkness of a river, the great car crept across the courtyard, and with blare of Klaxon passed out into the Strand and down the incline of Norfolk Street on to the Embankment.

Although Robert Hassan had never particularly interested Barbara, she had, in common with so many of those who had pitched their tents in the Bohemia of Chelsea, liked him well enough. The charm of manner which he had inherited from his Parisian mother blended fascinatingly with the wild untamed blood of his ancestral sheiks. Handsome, rich, and with just a spice of devilry beneath the veneer, Robert Hassan was welcome everywhere from Chelsea to Mayfair . . . and, it was whispered, in places far stranger than either.

Barbara listened to the man's easy chatter as the car purred cautiously through the smother of the riverside. Small talk only. The coming Arts Club Ball, the chances of Vera's Academy picture now nearing completion, the latest scandal of the Café Royalists, all were touched upon lightly, amusingly, and Barbara, her hand looped in the crook of her lover's arm, heard it all through her own dreams. Happy, rose-tinted dreams.

It was as they were passing Boadicea's statue that Basil, without warning, felt the little white-gloved fingers tighten upon his arm, thought he heard a faint sigh from the girl sitting beside him. And yet when he looked down at her, Barbara was smiling—smiling, had he but known it, to cloak a nameless fear that had, chill as the fog that lay beyond the car windows, gripped suddenly at her heart.

A fear that remained with her, vague and nebulous, during the gay little party in Vera Peacock's studio. Neither the fragrant devilled kidneys conjured by their hostess from her silver chafing-dish nor the coffee so wondrously brewed at Hassan's directions by the imperturbable Ali could dispel the vapours. They cloyed her new-found happiness, made her strangely quiet.

" Miss Manton is tired ? " Robert Hassan looked up from the piano at which he was sitting, his fingers wandering dreamily over the keys.

" A little, Mr. Hassan. Basil, if you're to start out adventuring in the morning, it's time you were in bed." Then, turning to the man at the piano, " You never seem to tire, Mr. Hassan."

" Healthy ancestry, Miss Manton. A thousand years of desert tomb robbers. We're a wild, untamed lot."

Vera Peacock's eyes were upon the speaker. Big china-blue eyes they were. " I'd just love to see the desert. I think I'll run over some time and paint. You must show me the ropes, Mr. Hassan."

"Only too glad. You must arrange your visit so that it fits in with one of mine. I can show you the real desert out at El Bahar."

"You go there often?"

Robert Hassan shrugged his shoulders. "About once every two years. By the way, Basil, it's the Arabian Desert you're bound for, isn't it?"

Basil nodded. "Silwa way."

"I was wondering whether I could be of any use to you. I know a host of people in Cairo."

"That's good of you, Hassan. But I'll only be in Cairo about two days, and Traverson——"

"Traverson?" Hassan looked up sharply.

"Bertie Traverson. He's in the Government service. Secret agent of sorts. D'you know Traverson?"

Robert Hassan shook his head. He turned to Ali and said a few words in Arabic.

"Not up to your best efforts, this coffee, Ali." The man turned to Barbara. "And you, Miss Manton, do you not want to see the desert? It looks as though I'd be having a house party at El Bahar one of these days." He looked round the studio with a smile. "Just as you are. West meeting East. . . . If you're ready, Basil, Ali can drive us back. I'm going to St. James' Street."

And so the little party broke up. Barbara watched the fog-shrouded lights of the Daimler from Vera's window, then turned to her hostess.

"I'm feeling what the Scotch call fey, Vera. Fey and sleepy. Good-night."

Upstairs in her own little studio flat, Barbara Manton lit the gas fire and curled herself up in a big chair before it. The vapours that had gathered about her would not be driven away. They remained with her, strangling the happiness that should be hers, torturing her with a nameless dread. It was fear, a deadening fear, that had perhaps had its birth in the vision of Ali's turbaned head silhouetted against the fog through the front window of the Daimler . . . it had been that which had caused her to clutch at Basil's arm . . . born perhaps of the curious elusive scent that had pervaded the interior of the limousine. A scent at once sweet, cloyingly sweet and strangely evil . . . a scent, Barbara told herself, of long dead ages.

As the girl lay awake, staring into the darkness, listening to the tiny sounds from the muffled world outside, this dread of something evil that waited to strike at the man she loved remained with her. And when, at long last, sleep came to her, her fancies followed her into the world of dreams.

But Miss Barbara Manton laughed heartily at her terrors as she parted the curtains of her studio window upon the morning following the party at the Savoyard and looked out upon a sun-bathed river-side. Gone, as was the fog, were all her silly fancies of the night hours. She must take a little more care of herself, have Heppel make her up a tonic and go to bed at a reasonable time. That should be easy now that there would be no Basil to take her to dances and for midnight rides.

The girl looked very lovely. Her slender, boyish figure was swathed in a fur-edged negligée of some powder blue material that clung lovingly about her; her tiny arched feet were thrust into a pair of mules of brocaded silver. The wintry sun slanting in at the window cast a halo about the flower-like little face and kissed the neatly coiled hair into living gold. She glanced at the jewelled trifle at her wrist and saw that it was already past ten. Basil would be by now on his way to Dover upon the first stage of his adventure. It had been arranged between them that last night should be their farewell, and Barbara raised the ring he had placed upon her finger in the Savoyard and pressed her lips to it and murmured a God-speed. . . . It was a ring, he had told her, that had been given to him by his father, a scarab of the Nineteenth Dynasty that would seal her to him until such time as he would be able to drive her to Bond Street to choose a token rather more conventional. The tiny carven eyes of the blue-green beetle looked coldly into hers . . . wise, cunning little eyes that for a moment almost brought back the girl's fears.

But such fancies are for the night, not for a glorious morning in February, a morning that holds the promise of spring. Barbara set a match to her gas fire and drew up close to its warmth the big chintz-covered chair in which she had sat the night before, curling herself up in its roomy seat. She lit a cigarette—really she must cut down on the insidious little tubes—whistled a good-morning to the canary, put out the tip of a very rosy and very impudent tongue at the little beetle, and gave herself up to her thoughts. Every smallest thing that Basil had said to her came back to her now out of the medley of memories of that wonderful night.

First and foremost, she was not to worry. She was not to mope. Basil had been very insistent on that point. She was to go on as she had been going on. Work her usual hours. Play her usual hours. Of course she was to go to the Arts Club Ball but, Basil had added with a laugh, she was to dance discreetly. She was not to wear her ring in public, and she was to say nothing to her friends about her engagement. There was nothing to hide, but when congratulations should be in the air Basil was determined that he should be there to share them. For the present no one was to know anything except his father to whom he would write.

A smile crept about the corners of Barbara's lips. It was the tiny blue beetle that gave her the idea. The Albert Hall revel was not for a fortnight yet, but all Bohemia was busy with talk of it and with designs for its dresses. Barbara should be busy too. Surely, if the little beetle formed part of her costume it would pass unremarked ; at least it would not have the significance which Basil seemed so anxious to avoid. A costume of which the beetle should form a part would attune with her thoughts, would, perhaps, bring Basil a little nearer in spirit. A priestess of the Temple of Amen-Ra, perhaps, or a lady from the court of Cleopatra. She reached across to a table and took up a sketch block and became absorbed with pencil and crayon. And the little beetle upon her finger moved to and fro with the deft strokes of the artist's hand, the light from the gas fire playing strange shadow tricks in the beady eyes. Barbara held the sketch at arm's length and smiled.

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The hands of the little gilt clock on the mantelpiece pointed to half-past ten . . . to eleven . . . and still the little powder blue figure curled up in the big chair wielded her pencil, suggesting by sure touches the graceful lines of a figure that stood by the banks of the Nile gazing up the river . . . as though she waited for a lover.

And then, taking the ring from her finger and laying it aside in her jewel case, Barbara Manton ran lightly down the flight of stairs to see what Vera Peacock thought of her suggested costume.

CHAPTER II

PROFESSOR AMBROSE GAULT, always a student, had, after the death of his wife, retired from the social round which he frankly admitted had bored him to extinction. With Basil's departure for Oxford, now six years since, Ambrose Gault had considered that he had done all that could be expected of him: had sold his house in Half Moon Street, auctioned his Victorian furniture, and with his old housekeeper, who had been his childhood's nurse, and his memories for company had taken up anew the threads of life in Storm House.

Aptly named indeed was the old-world mansion perched upon the highest point of Hampstead, for the winds of all four quarters beat upon its stout walls, whistled among its quaint gables and chimneys, set dancing the green foliage of the great elms in its tangled garden. And Ambrose Gault, whose reverence for things of antiquity existed only so far as those of very remote ages, had no compunction in adapting the place to his needs.

Adam mantelpieces, wondrous ceilings, noble panellings, Tudor brickwork, all came ruthlessly under the axe of the housebreaker. Such, to the Professor's way of thinking, modern things called for no consideration. True, one wing was left undisturbed and in place of the demolished portion of the mansion Ambrose erected a crude, shapeless, but eminently efficient structure for the housing of the treasures that he had as a young man travelled to all parts of the East to collect, and upon which he had dissipated the greater part of his considerable fortune.

Upon an afternoon in the week following Basil's departure for Egypt, Ambrose Gault sat with his papers and catalogues in the small screened-off corner of his museum where it was his habit to read, write, and transact such business as his untiring search for new treasures demanded. But upon this particular afternoon the Professor had not been writing, save for a letter addressed to Basil which lay sealed upon his desk awaiting posting.

With chair tilted backwards at a dangerous angle, Ambrose was staring at the ceiling and thinking of his son. Almost, he had persuaded himself, he, too, would go just once more to the Land of the Pharaohs, but the thought of leaving his beloved treasures to the care of old Mrs. Fulton, together with his doctor's not altogether disinterested orders, had decided him. But in his mind's eye he was upon this afternoon seeing the vast undulating sea of the desert, the glaring sunlight and the violet shadows, the sombre temples of dead faiths, the flowing waters of the age-old Nile, palms raised like banners against the topaz of the sky, burnouses flying in the wind. He saw himself as he had been, a vibrant young man who, with the dear woman who had been his wife, had journeyed by camel and dhow into the far corners of that wonderland, to places where, in those days, one took one's life in one's hands, excavating, delving into the dead glories of Egypt.

And from these memories his mind wandered to the girl whom Basil had chosen for his partner through life. He had met Barbara Manton often, had watched the love grow up between them and had felt well up within him bitter-sweet memories of the time when he, too, had had his romance. At first, perhaps, he had experienced a little disappointment. Basil could have done much better, he had thought, than this girl who could find nothing better to do than draw silly fashions for sillier women to wear.

But with the passing of time Ambrose Gault had capitulated. His heart must have been dead as that of one of his beloved mummies not to have fallen beneath the spell of Barbara Manton's charm. There was that about the girl that found its way into all hearts, and Ambrose Gault soon knew that his son had chosen wisely. He took from his pocket the letter he had received from Basil upon the eve of his departure, and smiled as he read the happiness that ran between the lines. It was in his mind to envy this big son of his the splendid vista of the life that lay before him. Love, adventure, all that made of life a precious thing, lay spread, the gates of the desert opening to his touch, opening to show him that enchanted gloryland——

"Good-afternoon, Professor."

The chair righted itself, and an astonished Ambrose Gault rose to his feet. Then held out two hands in welcome to the vision that stood framed within the doorway of his little sanctum.

A vision indeed. Barbara had walked up from the station and the airs of the Heath had called the colour into her cheeks and had blown a few vagrant wisps of gold about her face. The tailored coat and skirt with its deep edging of fur showed the trim figure to perfection. From the crown of her smart beaver toque to the heels of her little suede shoes, Barbara Manton was a picture of the typical English girl, modern, vividly alive, entirely adorable.

Ambrose Gault held her at arm's length and smiled down into the little upturned face.

" You'll have my old priests leaping back to life if you come breaking in upon their slumbers like this. Even bitumen won't stand the strain. I swear that every mummy in the place is thrilled. That old fellow up there on the upper shelf winked at me. I'm sure he did."

The girl looked round rather fearsomely. She threw her muff and gloves upon the desk and sank into the chair which the Professor placed for her. She stretched her little shoes out to the warmth of the gas fire. Her eyes rested for a moment upon the swathed figure of the mummy that had been the subject of Ambrose Gault's little jest.

" Mrs. Fulton wouldn't announce me. She asked me to walk right in."

The Professor laughed. " The poor woman hasn't got used to this place yet. All her life among these dead old kings and priests and yet she can't a-bear them, as she puts it. She cleans up under protest and says that it's no work for a Christian woman to spend precious hours dusting heathens. Our friend up there on the shelf doesn't wink at Mrs. Fulton, I'll be bound. Ring the bell, will you, Barbara, and we'll see about some tea."

" Not for me, Professor." Again her eye sought the mummy on the upper shelf. " And I wouldn't joke about these poor old gentlemen that you have dragged from their tombs. They say its bad luck to make fun of a mummy. But there," and the girl bowed low before the Priest of Amen-Ra, " I've made your peace with him. I've apologised for your levity. And now, my dear father that is to be, I'm going to take a look round."

Professor Gault raised his eyebrows. " And since when has the utterly modern Barbara Manton taken an interest in the things of the past ? "

" Don't ask questions. As they say in the advertisement of some food stuff I saw the other day—' there's a reason.' "

Ambrose Gault linked his arm within that of the girl. " I stand rebuked," he said, and led the way slowly between the rows of cases that rose tier upon tier to the height of some six feet. Nothing pleased him more than to show his treasures to an appreciative audience. Cartouches, scarabs, mummied cats from Bubastes, alabaster vases from Thebes. But Barbara passed on, giving but a casual glance to left and right. Then before an open case in which were heaped an assortment of amulets, necklaces and seals, she came to a pause. Selecting an ornament comprised of a thin chain from which depended a slab of greenish stone, she held it up to the light that streamed into the museum through the great heavily-barred western window.

" This I think will do," she said.

" Do for what, Barbara ? "

The girl thrust out an impertinent little chin. " I thought I told you not to ask questions. Can I borrow it ? "

" And would it be very indiscreet if I were to put just one more question and ask the reason ? "

Barbara held the slab of stone against the grey of her coat and looked at it quizzingly. " How curious you men are." She stamped one of the little suede shoes. " Can I borrow it ? "

" Of course you can borrow it, Barbara. Let me see."

Ambrose Gault took the necklet from the girl's hand and together they returned to the little office. The Professor inserted a glass in the socket of his right eye and examined the marks upon the greenish disc.

" It's rather hard to make head or tail of this, Barbara. Curiously enough I've been writing to Basil about this very thing. It intrigues me. There are hieroglyphics here but they seem to be quite meaningless. I rather fancy that this is part only of some ornament, a necklace, I should say, and that originally there were other stones like this. Read together, they might have once made sense. Some love charm, perhaps, or one of those prayers for the dead of which the Egyptians were so fond. I've mentioned my opinions in my letter to Basil in Cairo. The thing is unique, and I know he'll be interested."

" It's not valuable, is it ? Because I wouldn't like to borrow it if it is. Where did you get it ? "

" It's of no intrinsic value. All old things are valuable to those who appreciate them."

" Is it very old ? "

" About the Twenty-third Dynasty. Considerably before the birth of Christ."

Barbara took the stone in her hand. Her eyes were misty with the wonder of it. "I don't think I'd better take it."

"Yes, do. You asked me where I got this. I bought it with a lot of other stuff at a sale in Wales last month. Sir Elmer Roacher's collection. A keen collector but not very discriminating. I'm having the stuff catalogued next week. And now that I've told you all this, won't you tell me what you want the thing for ? "

Barbara took up her vanity bag and from it a folded paper. It was the finished drawing of the lady by the Nile, the first idea of which she had sketched out upon the morning after Basil's departure.

"It's for the ball, Professor. The Arts Club affair at the Albert Hall. The design is in white and gold. It occurred to me that I might borrow something really old to go with it. Clarkson's done the dress, it's a lady from the court of Rameses II. This greenish grey will look topping on the white. Let me have it Professor, there's a dear."

For a moment Ambrose Gault was back in the days when dear eyes had looked into his, when soft lips had voiced some desire that it had been his loving joy to gratify. He took the necklace and dropped it among the feminine litter in Barbara's vanity bag.

"My dear," he said, "you can have . . . the world."

Barbara walked slowly down the winding way that led through the tangle of the Heath to the station. At the bend in the path she turned and looked back at Storm House. Sinister it lay with the trees in its neglected garden raising their gaunt leafless arms to the sky. She saw the row of heavily barred windows, the thick glass of the roofing. Again the fear that she had felt upon the night when Hassan had made coffee in Vera's studio passed like a chill wind across her heart. But she shook off the feeling with a shrug of irritation and clutched her vanity bag tighter in her gloved hand. The sun was shining, little birds chirping in the bushes, the ball was to-morrow night . . . and the grey-green stone *would* look topping against the white and gold of her dress.

CHAPTER III

FROM her point of vantage in the third tier box which the *Daily Record* had taken for the benefit of their staff and friends, Barbara Manton looked down upon a sight the like of which she had never before seen. It was as though the vast circular floor of the Albert Hall was the field of vision of a giant kaleidoscope, the thousand and one dancers each his or her own particular piece of coloured glass, whirling, laughing, darting hither-thither. Monk and peasant. Courtier and jester. Nun and devil. The great mad merry-go-round of Bohemia's yearly festival.

It was eleven o'clock, an hour yet before the real fun would be at its height, and already Barbara had wearied of dancing. Far more attuned to her mood to sit perched up here in the vasty circle of gaily decorated boxes, watching and chatting with such of her friends who came and went, availing themselves of the generous hospitality of the *Record*.

Barbara had not thought it possible to miss anyone so much as she had missed Basil. The men with whom she had danced had interested her not at all. Hassan, who as Basil's friend had claimed the supper dance, had not yet put in an appearance. The girl was looking forward to seeing Hassan. He would be able to tell her things about the land where, since her lover's departure, her thoughts had lain. She swept the floor with her eyes for the slim figure of the Egyptian.

"Quite a little scoop in its way. Bernard ought to dish up a red hot story. The public are eating anything dealing with Egypt just now. Here's luck."

The words came to Barbara's ears across the babel of talk in the box. The speaker was Charlie Waters, the sporting editor of the *Record*. She leant her head towards the group. Waters went on.

"What Basil doesn't know about Egypt wouldn't half fill a thimble. If he thinks he has lighted upon one of these Khor affairs you can bet he's right. However, it made a good par. anyway."

The girl who was listening felt suddenly guilty. So there had been a dispatch from Basil in the *Record* that morning that appeared to have been of considerable importance. A good story, Waters had called it, and she had not even taken the trouble to look for it. There was something rather distasteful in the thought that all London had been reading Basil's message except the one who the writer would most have wished to read it. Perhaps there was a copy of the paper lying about somewhere in the box. The ball and the thought of her costume had occupied her mind that day to the exclusion of everything else, and her own copy she remembered lay unopened on her bureau in the studio.

She wondered why she had given the ball a single thought. Gladly would she be at that moment curled up in the big chintz covered chair before her fire dreaming dreams. The noise of the revel wearied her. The band she thought too loud. Soon she would slip away, she told herself, and after this she would throw herself heart and soul into her work and do nothing, go nowhere, until Basil's return. There was after all nothing to do, nowhere to go without Basil. Also she registered a vow that the *Record* should be read from first word to last every morning. She would do that even before she started her work.

A tap upon the door of the box broke into her thoughts. Turning, she saw that Charlie Waters had opened it and was speaking to one of the uniformed attendants. He was looking towards her. Then, making his way through the crowd about the little table where the Foreign Editor was engaged in dispensing gold necked hospitality, he reached her side.

"You are wanted, Miss Manton, on one of the telephones. This man will show you where. If I can be of any use——"

"Thank you, Mr. Waters. I'll be quite all right."

The attendant stepped forward. "Number six cubicle, miss, on this floor. I think, miss, that the message is urgent."

She gathered her cloak about her and followed the man from the box out into the sweep of the circular corridor. Perhaps it was Robert Hassan ringing up to say that he could not keep his appointment. She half hoped it might be. There would be nothing then to keep her from leaving when the mood took her. Strange that her thoughts should be running so much upon Robert Hassan that evening.

Barbara entered the telephone box with something of dread. She sensed in some vague way trouble. She put the receiver to her ear and was startled at the sound of her voice, a voice that sounded almost strange to her and little above a whisper. . . .

"Yes . . . Miss Manton speaking . . . Barbara . . . yes . . . oh, is that you, Professor? . . . at this time of night. . . . What was that ? . . . Of course I'll come. . . . Don't ring off. . . ."

Impatiently the girl touched the lever, then seeing that the connection had been cut she hung up the receiver. The colour had left her cheeks, and she trembled a little as she scribbled a message on the back of one of her cards and asked the attendant to take it to the *Record* box. Then, with a glance at her wrist-watch, she hurried out to the vestibule and through the swing doors to where taxis were streaming up and discharging gay little parties beneath the porticoes. It was not difficult to find a driver who was willing to earn the pound note she tendered to be driven to Hampstead. A few moments and Barbara was swaying rapidly out into the traffic of Knightsbridge.

She sat upright staring straight before her. Curiously, the head and shoulders of the driver set her thinking of that other head silhouetted against the fog on the night when Ali had driven them out to Chelsea. Again she felt that nameless fear, that fear that something evil was closing like a net about the man she loved. And now, honest with herself, she knew that although she had put aside the fear, had told herself that it was all nerves, the terror had never left her since that moment when she had clutched at Basil's arm in Hassan's Daimler. It had been there always, somewhere in her sub-conscious mind. . . . And now this summons from Professor Gault.

Basil's father, a man of most methodical habits, was an early riser, and ten o'clock usually found him in bed. And now he was ringing up at close upon midnight . . . his whispered words came back to her . . . *and for God's sake bring the necklet.* Words spoken with an eagerness that was eloquent of the anxiety that lay behind them. Barbara's hand crept to her throat . . . how cold to her skin was the grey-green stone from Egypt.

On across Piccadilly Circus with its maze of flashing electric signs. Shaftesbury Avenue, Tottenham Court Road, and on past the sordid shops of Camden Town to the suburban gloom of Haverstock Hill and out on to the clean airs of the Heath.

Storm House was in darkness, and Barbara was glad of the little electric torch which she carried always with her in her vanity bag. She told the driver to wait, and the man lit a pipe and prepared for his vigil. " Rum start this," he thought, " to leave a ball where they did say the tickets are twenty quid each, without beer, to come out to a lively 'ole like this." But being somewhat of a philosopher and very well used to the vagaries of his clients, he left the affair to settle itself, and devoted all his energies to his pipe and the prospects for the Lincolnshire Handicap.

Barbara lighted her way along the twisted, weed-grown path. She saw now that there was a faint glow in the transom, and her knock was answered by Mrs. Fulton. Mrs. Fulton, in dressing-gown and list slippers, informed her that the master had told her to expect Miss Manton, and so she had been waiting by the kitchen fire to let her in. If Miss Manton didn't mind she would go to bed now and leave the door on the chain. The master was in the museum; Miss Manton knew her way. . . .

" Yes, Mrs. Fulton. I know the way quite well. You look tired out. I know you don't like the museum and all the bogey-bogeys. I'll say good-night to the mummies for you, Mrs. Fulton."

" Nasty, messy things . . . good-night, Miss Manton, and thank you."

Barbara knew the interior of Storm House as she knew the palm of her hand. She made her way along the wide passage and pushed open the baize doors which cut off the museum wing from the remainder of the house. With a start of surprise she found that the place was in darkness save where, upon the desk in the little corner sanctum, a green-shaded lamp shed a dull radiance.

But of Professor Gault there was no sign. A cup half filled with cocoa was upon the desk, and the man's horn-rimmed spectacles lay upon a folded copy of the *Record* of that morning's date. The cocoa, Barbara noticed, was still warm. Clearly the Professor had been called from his reading for a moment, and no doubt would return quite soon. Barbara sank down into the roomy desk chair, lit a cigarette and picked up the paper. At once her eyes lighted upon a portion marked, presumably by the Professor, with a blue pencil. She tilted the green shade of the lamp and held the paper close.

" . . . the portion of green stone being clearly half only of the original object and the heiroglyphics require the assistance of the complementary portion to complete the meaning. To my mind it refers to the final hiding-place of the immense treasure from the Temple of Khor at Memphis, hidden in panic by the priests when Piankhi of Ethiopia captured the city in the Twenty-third Dynasty, about 730 B.C."

So this was what the Professor meant. Here was what Charlie Waters had referred to in the Albert Hall. The necklet that had seemed to be but an unconsidered item in Sir Elmer Roacher's very indifferent collection had suddenly assumed a new importance. Perhaps, here to her hand, was the key to one of those fascinating romances, one of those . . .

How still the world was. Why did Professor Gault not come back? He was expecting her, must have heard Mrs. Fulton let her in. Barbara rose and peered out into the darkness of the museum. All grey-green it was by the moonlight that flooded in through the panes of frosted glass in the roof, grey-green with monstrous inky shadows. And still . . . still as the tombs from which Professor Gault's treasures had been wrested.

And then suddenly the scene at the ball came vividly before the girl's eyes and the contrast thrilled her. The madly jazzing thousands of the modern world, the glass cases with their ancient dead. Something approaching panic came to her. The fears that had been hers since Basil went away crowded now thickly upon her.

"Professor Gault. . . ."

Barbara did not recognise the voice as her own. The sound was caught up in little whispered echoes among the vaulted glass of the roof. The girl placed a hand over her mouth to smother the scream that was upon her lips. Running to the baize doors she felt feverishly up and down the lintel. And then finding the switch flooded the museum with light. She was calmer now, and the tiny sandals upon the parquet flooring made no sound as she began a tour of the cases. In one that contained a dark wood sarcophagus she saw herself as in a mirror, the white and gold of the costume of Egypt, the thin chain and the stone about her neck. The sight reassured her in some way, brought her more into touch with reality.

Barbara was no coward, and the museum was no new ground to her. The glazed eyes of the embalmed cats and the stark forms of the mummies left her unmoved. If only she could find Professor Gault. Surely he would not have gone to bed and left her to take care of herself. . . . And then, turning an angle midway down the room, the girl pulled up with a cry.

Upon the parquet flooring, sprawling shapelessly, lay the father of the man she loved. Ambrose Gault had fallen, and in falling had broken, perhaps with his head, the glass of the case that had held the antiquities from Sir Elmer Roacher's collection. From beneath his shoulder there showed a patch . . . dark . . . sinister. . . .

Barbara fell upon her knees, but as she raised the Professor's head she knew that never again in this life would the grey lips open in speech. Something terrible . . . something. . . . She gazed about her fearsomely.

The cases towered above her head, the moonlight mingled with the electric light upon the face of the dead man.

Surely . . . surely that was someone moving. Mrs. Fulton, perhaps, not hearing the master go to his room was braving the terrors of the museum . . . footsteps . . . running, now, somewhere over by the baize door. Then the museum was plunged again into darkness, and over there in the shadows something was moving. The cry that rose to Barbara's lips was strangled. Her face and shoulders were engulfed in some soft clinging material. She was borne backwards and downwards.

The folds of the stuff clung about her mouth, her nose, stifling her. In her nostrils an evil odour . . . the smell of dead ages.

LIBRARY, SRINAGAR

CHAPTER IV

In the morning-room of a flat overlooking the old red walls of St. James' Palace a man sat in the embrasure of a window. The watery rays of the February sun cast a halo about the sleek black head, tinged faintly with rose the olive of the thin ascetic face. Against the background of ochre cushions Robert Hassan was an arresting figure, uncommon, bizarre. In his hand was a small grey-green slab, flat, and about the size of a silver dollar, but Robert Hassan was not looking at it. His eyes were fixed upon the sky above the turrets of the palace. Robert Hassan was seeing visions, dreaming dreams.

He was back twenty years, back in the days of his boyhood in Egypt. The scene was painted in the sky as though it were a mirage. A cluster of Arab houses with, among them, one of seeming importance. Upon the flat roof a couch had been carried so that Mahomet Hassan could look once more upon the land he loved, the date groves and the cotton fields that had brought him fortune, the shimmering sands beyond the oasis. The dying words of his father sounded in the ears of the man in St. James' Street.

There, upon that flat roof overlooking the desert, kneeling beside the couch, Robert Hassan had listened, a boy of eight years, to the story of the Stones of

Khor, the twin keys to the treasure hastily but securely hidden at the time when the Ethiopians, during the Twenty-third Dynasty, were pressing into the Land of the Pharaohs. It was a wonderful story and, apart from the significance of it to the descendants of the Hassans, a story to stir the heart of a boy. He had listened open-mouthed and, the telling finished, the dying man had laid his charge upon him. Robert Hassan had received it as a sacred trust, raising his little brown hand to the sky and calling upon the Prophet to witness his obedience. A solemn charge it was that Robert Hassan received there upon the edge of the age-old desert, a charge that he would search ever and without ceasing, even as his father and his father's father back for generations had searched, to recover one of the Stones which had been handed down in the Hassan family from a remote tomb-robbing ancestor, and which had been lost or stolen from them in the early years of the eighteenth century. And young Robert had thrilled as he listened.

" But did you not say, father, that one of the Stones is valueless without the other? How then will it benefit me if I succeed in my search? "

The dying man had smiled at this. " We who are passing," he had said, " see far. . . ."

And Mahomet Hassan had laid his hand upon the dark head of the boy and had spoken no more. And Robert had risen from his knees and sent for the women to attend the dead. He had walked to the edge of the roof and looked down upon the little village of El Bahar, upon the women wailing at the gate, at the groups of men discussing together the passing of the master. The little eight-year-old boy had looked across the huddle of houses to the edge of the desert and out beyond that to the violet distance, and with that curious fatalism of the East he had known that his father spoke truth, that his dying eyes had seen that the secret of the Stones of Khor would some day . . . somewhere . . .

And now after twenty years the miracle had happened, and Robert Hassan, son of Mahomet, sat in the window of his flat in St. James' Street, one of the Stones of Khor in his hand. His father's words came again to him . . . "We who are passing see far . . ." He smiled to himself. It was almost as though the old gods of the Egyptians were awakening from their sleep to take a hand in the game.

Basil Gault's article in the *Record* had shown clearly to Robert Hassan that chance had done what years of patient effort had failed to do, and that the young Egyptologist had stumbled by sheer accident upon the thing for which he, Robert Hassan, had been searching since the day his father laid the charge upon him. Whether it was the particular stone that had been lost or stolen from the Hassan family he had no means of knowing until, within a few hours of his reading the article, he had come across, among a pile of circulars that had lain upon his desk unopened for some days, the catalogue of Sir Elmer Roacher's sale in Wales. A glance at the date had told him that the sale was a thing of the past, and he had been about to throw the catalogue in the waste-paper basket when his eye had caught something which gave him pause. The words stood out from the list of lots as though graven in fire :

"LOT 55.—*Grey-green stone with hieroglyphics. Supposed to be from the Temple of Khor. Period about* Twenty-third *or* Twenty-fourth *Dynasty.*"

For a few moments the man had stood motionless. *We who are passing see far.* The meaning of the words was quite clear now. His father had seen the union of the Stones of Khor, had seen them, separated for over two thousand years, drawing inexorably together. Robert remembered how the dying man had smiled when he had asked him of what value one Stone would be. Truly Mahomet Hassan had seen far.

It had taken but a few minutes upon the telephone with the auctioneer who had conducted the Welsh sale for Robert Hassan to learn that Lot 55 had been bought by Professor Gault and, with the knowledge, action became the essence of the contract. Professor Gault would have read by now his son's article in the *Record*, and he would remember the lot which he had bought in Wales. Nothing upon earth would induce him to part with his treasure until such time as he could confer with Basil. There was, of course, the chance that Professor Gault had not yet read his paper. Many such men, living as they do in the dim ages of the past, care little for the present. Quite likely that the Professor had not opened his newspaper for days, and but few visitors entered the doors of Storm House. It might be days before the report of Basil Gault found its way into the house on the Heath.

Robert Hassan came out of his dream, and as his eyes rested upon the object in his hand, he paled beneath his dusky skin. Was it the sun, or was it a reddish stain upon the—— Bah, he must get his nerves in order.

He rose from the window-seat, placed the Stone of Khor in the drawer of his bureau, and lit a cigarette. His hand shook as he took the Nestor from the silver box. Robert Hassan frowned and then smiled. It was not usual for the lithe brown hand to tremble, but surely he had all the excuse in the world. It had been four o'clock before he had gone to bed and after five before he had slept. Rather a full evening it had been, too—a murder, an abduction, and the recovery of a two thousand years old relic . . . a combination such as this is apt to try the nerve of the stoutest of men.

The telephone trilled. Again Robert Hassan started, then with a short laugh he took hold of himself. The voice when he had lifted the receiver was firm.

"That you, Ali? . . . Cannabis Indica . . . and hyoscin . . . good. . . . Oh, twenty hours at the least, you say. . . . Very well . . . Limehouse Causeway at eight. . . ."

The son of Mahomet Hassan hung up the receiver and crossed to the sideboard. An unusual thing for Robert Hassan to drink before the evening, but he told himself he needed it. Then in his bath-robe that was half dressing-gown and half burnous he put in ten minutes with dumb-bells and Indian clubs. He dressed himself leisurely and seated himself at his bureau. For a quarter of an hour he was busy with a telegraph form and a small red-covered book protected with a tiny lock. The code of Hassan & Co. had been compiled to deal with transactions in cotton, with an occasional side line in opium, and it was a little difficult to adapt it to the business in hand. But at last the thing was done to his satisfaction, and the girl behind the counter at the post office at the foot of St. James' Street, who was a great reader of Mr. Robert Hichens, thrilled as she read the address on the form handed over by the slim handsome man who might easily be an Egyptian prince. . . . *Maspar Cafe of the Green Figs Bulak Cairo.* Yes, it was decidedly thrilling, and the little bobbed-haired telegraphist would have given the world to know what the meaningless jumble of code words meant.

At twelve-thirty Mr. Robert Hassan entered the smoking-room of the Barbarians Club, chose an arm-chair in one of the big windows overlooking the Green Park, and asked the waiter to bring him the *Times.* Then he settled down to read, mark, and inwardly digest such facts as the reporters had brought to light of what was already being referred to as " The Storm House Mystery."

And having digested the uncoloured statements of the *Times*, Robert Hassan took up the *Daily Wire.* After the somewhat bald facts of the *Times*, the *Wire* should be amusing. It was.

" . . . Seldom has London awakened to such a mystery. One has to go far back in the annals of crime to find a story in which East and West are so blended in mystery. Professor Gault, an authority on all matters Eastern, had, so far as is known, no enemies, but one is forced to the conclusion that the murderer entered the museum at Storm House with a definite object which certainly was not robbery. Nothing had been touched, and a large amount of money in the Professor's desk was found to be intact. An air of mystery is heightened by the report that a woman in white flowing garments was known to have visited the Professor last night at a late hour. Storm House is strictly guarded by the police, but we may expect a statement within a few hours."

Mr. Robert Hassan smiled inwardly. He scanned the cotton quotations, the stock exchange notes . . . and went in to lunch.

CHAPTER V

THE first definite memory that came to Barbara Manton in her returning consciousness was the slow striking of a clock, dull muffled sounds that seemed to the dazed senses of the girl to come from somewhere a very long way off. Half consciously she counted seven of these strokes.

She was lying upon a couch or divan in a room that was entirely strange to her. The warm woollen dressing-gown that she was wearing was, too, a garment most certainly not from her own wardrobe. A curious room with a big heavily-curtained window, and with strange Eastern hangings upon the walls. A faint Eastern odour, too, of spices, bitter-sweet.

The half light by which she noted her surroundings came, suffused, from a lamp suspended upon a bracket above the mantelshelf, a lamp shaded with ruby glass that burned dim, mysterious, and that filled the corners of the room with deep shadows. A fire was burning low in the grate, and upon a small table beside the couch were medicine bottles and a dish of fruit.

How still it was. Barbara, raising herself upon an elbow, passed a hand wearily across her forehead, then lifted her head, listening. From beyond the window came the elusive murmur of the life of streets, but within the house all was still . . . still as the museum in Storm House had been when . . .

A little cry sprang to Barbara's lips as memories, vague, confused, crowded back upon her. A memory of a man, someone whom she had known, who lay dead beside a glass case in which were mummies and a litter of trinkets . . . a darkened house upon a heath and black shadows and green moonlight . . . memories of reading somewhere of the Ethiopians capturing some city in ancient Egypt. . . .

Then, as suddenly as they had come to her, the memories went, leaving Barbara dazed, bewildered. All again was chaos in a brain that ached almost beyond the bearing. With an effort that left her pale and trembling, she rose to her feet and stood upright, one steadying hand upon the wall. In great heaving waves the room swayed about her. It was as though there were tiny leaden weights hanging behind her eyes. And after a moment's pause the girl walked with uncertain steps to the window and held aside the heavy draperies.

Outside it was quite dark, but at the corner of the street below, a little way to the left, a brightly-lighted public-house showed Barbara a narrow, cobbled roadway, in the gutters of which grimy children were noisily at play. A group of slatternly women were gathered about the doorway of the gin palace, and someone within the glittering portals was playing an accordion, the wheezy strains mingled with the shrill cries of the children and the raucous voices of the women.

Barbara let the curtain fall back into place and crossed the room to the door, to find it locked. Once more little flashes of distorted recollection assailed her, flitting for a moment before her mental vision to pass as mists pass before the rising sun.

A bureau stood in a recess to the right of the door, but upon it were neither papers nor books, only a calendar. With a start Barbara saw that the date upon the latter showed Saturday, February 19th. She puckered her brows in thought. Surely, if her aching brain told her rightly, the Arts Club Ball had been on the twelfth. And with the thought the confusion in Barbara Manton's brain became worse confounded.

She called to mind the message that had come from Hampstead for her as she had sat in the *Record* box watching the dancers, remembered her long drive out to Hampstead, her entry into Storm House and its darkened museum. So far all was clear. It was only after that that all became blurred like things out of focus in a photograph. Space, time, all individuality seemed to be annihilated. If the calendar did not lie, a week had passed since then, seven days that to the girl might have been seven minutes or seven years or seventy. Save for those hideous glimpses, seen as in a glass darkly, of a man lying dead, all was blank. Surely those pictures must be but part of some dreadful dream, the echoes of a delirium through which she had passed. All was unreal. . . .

Of course. She had been ill. Delirious. How else account for the medicine bottles, the strange room, the passing of a week? These mental disturbances were but the aftermath of the darkness in which that week had been spent.

And yet . . . Barbara gazed about her wonderingly.

If this room were in a hospital or a nursing home it was a very strange apartment. The neighbourhood, too, with its squalor and noise, hardly the place where one would look to find such an institution. Perhaps there was a bell.

Came the sound of a door shutting somewhere below. Barbara raised her head, stood motionless, listening. The sound now of steps upon the stairs. Steps that told of more than one walker. Then silence, and again steps, now of one person only who walked on tip-toe and who paused outside the door of the room. A moment's tense silence and then a key grated, and as the door opened Barbara drew back with a little cry. Surely her dream, if dream it were, was not yet ended, her delusions not yet a thing of the past.

" Mr. . . . Hassan."

Robert Hassan entered, closed the door softly behind him, and turned to the girl with a smile. The olive-tinted face was paler than Barbara remembered to have seen it.

" You are feeling better, I hope, Miss Manton."

For a moment Barbara was at a loss for an answer. There was something so strange, so bizarre about all this. Something that prevented speech. Her dream fancies, the curiously Eastern room, the squalor of the neighbourhood beneath her window, the smiling face of Robert Hassan. She sank wearily upon the edge of the couch and passed a hand across her eyes.

" I . . . I don't understand all this, Mr. Hassan. What is this place ? Why am I here ? You ask me if I am better. I did not know that I had been ill."

" You have been very ill."

" For how long ? "

" Since the night of the Arts Club Ball."

" I remember the . . . but it's all vague like a blurred picture."

The man crossed to the fire and poked the coals into a blaze. He rearranged the curtain at the window that Barbara had disturbed, then drew up a chair before the hearth.

" If you will sit here, Miss Manton, we will talk. I have a little story to tell you. It is a curious story."

Barbara glanced at the clock over the fire-place. " But, Mr. Hassan, I don't want to listen to stories. I want you to take me home . . . to Chelsea."

The man held out his hands before him and shrugged his shoulders. Bewildered, and with a nameless fear clutching at her heart, Barbara rose and took the seat Hassan had indicated. The man's eyes never for an instant left hers. They burned into her very being. And when she was seated he went on.

" You ask me to take you home, Miss Manton. Is it possible that you do not remember the night of the ball . . . all that happened on that night ? "

" I remember perfectly, up to a point."

" Not the end ? "

Barbara shook her head. " Little confused jumbles . . . that's all."

Robert Hassan raised his eyebrows. He took his cigarette-case from his pocket and offered a Melachrino to the girl. She shook her head.

" No, thank you. Yes, please smoke yourself."

And when Robert Hassan had lighted his cigarette, he turned to her with a rueful expression upon his handsome face.

" You make it rather hard for me, Miss Manton. But there's nothing for it but for me to tell my story as I know it. I had hoped that with your recovery you would have made the telling unnecessary. My position, Miss Manton, is not a pleasant one."

" You frighten me. . . ."

Hassan held up a slender hand. " Please let me tell my story in my own way. There is nothing to be gained by any evasion on my part. Frankness is necessary if we are to clear this matter up. If I hurt you it is because that, too, is necessary. My story, Miss Manton, begins at one o'clock upon the morning of the thirteenth—six days ago."

" That was the morning after the ball."

" When the fun was at its height, to be precise. Perhaps you will remember that I was not at the Albert Hall. I had intended going—I had arranged a dance with you, you will recollect—but a touch of my old fever stopped me. I had already gone to bed when you drove up to my flat. . . . Please do not interrupt me, Miss Manton. We are in a terrible situation, both of us, and we must pull together if we are to see our way out of it."

Barbara had been about to speak, but at a gesture from Hassan she remained silent. Her eyes were fixed in growing horror upon the face of the man before her.

" It was a little after one when Ali came into my bedroom and roused me and told me that you were in my study. I wouldn't believe it at first, then I thought that it was a rag, and that a party of the Chelsea people, Vera and her friends, had come in a body to dig me out. I slipped on a dressing-gown and went into the study, fully expecting to be assailed by a crowd of students and dragged off to the Albert Hall whether I liked it or not. Surely you remember my coming to you. Surely you have a recollection of that ? "

The girl's lips set in a thin line. She rose from her chair and walked towards the door. The man's eyes narrowed as he watched her.

" I neither remember it, Mr. Hassan, nor do I believe it. I asked you just now to be good enough to take me back to Chelsea. I will not trouble you. No doubt I can find a cab."

The man did not move. " I must ask you to sit down again, Miss Manton. Believe me it is for your good."

She turned, one hand resting upon the handle of the door. " I have no time, Mr. Hassan, to listen to any more cock-and-bull stories."

Again that shrug of the shoulders that was so characteristic of Robert Hassan. The gesture was a legacy, clearly, from his Parisian mother.

" Perhaps when you have heard what you told me that night in my flat you will have less to say about cock-and-bull stories." He spoke quietly, almost sadly, and in some curious manner Barbara's heart was touched. Perhaps, after all, she had misjudged . . . it was all so dark. . . .

" Forgive me, Mr. Hassan. . . . I just don't understand. I only want to go back to Chelsea, to my studio. A week is a long time, and I'm behind with my *Record* sketches."

" Your studio, Miss Manton, is in the hands of the police."

" The police . . . you're joking, Mr. Hassan. What can the police want with me ? "

" I said, did I not, that I would have to hurt you. For that I beg you to forgive me. There has been a warrant out these three days for the arrest of Barbara Manton for the murder of Professor Gault on the night of the twelfth. I seem brutal, no doubt . . . won't you sit down and listen ? I have no thought but to serve you. You must believe that."

Barbara returned to the chair and sat down. She looked up into the man's face. Her own was strained, ashy.

" I am listening, Mr. Hassan."

Robert Hassan laughed shortly. " You are making it very hard for me," he said. " That early morning in my flat you told me a story. Pardon me if I say that I, too, thought it what you call a cock and a bull story. It was fully as difficult of belief as the one to which you are listening now. Fully. You told me that you and the Professor had quarrelled, that he had accused you of trying to rob him of something that he valued very much."

" Well, Mr. Hassan ? " Barbara's tones were level, low.

" It is difficult to speak of it. You told me that there was a struggle and that something seemed to possess you, that you caught up an old Arabian dagger and that somehow, quite unknown to you, the point of it entered the Professor's heart. You said that it was as though you were possessed by something . . . something that acted *through* you. . . . Believe me, Miss Manton, I am using your own words."

The girl was leaning forward, her lips parted. Her eyes were wide with terror, and they were fixed upon Robert Hassan. Held there. It was as though a caged bird were facing a serpent.

" Frankly, Miss Manton, I did not believe you. I laughed, I remember, thinking that still it was some joke, but one that was going beyond the bounds of good taste. I waited for what you call the catch. Then you showed me the stains upon the dress you were wearing. An Egyptian dress, white and gold. Then I knew that you would not lend yourself to so vile a jest. I began to believe you, just as you are beginning to believe me now. I felt that you were either mad or that you were under some delusion, some influence. But that you yourself believed what you were telling me I could no longer doubt."

Robert Hassan paused, half expecting the girl to speak. But she did not, and he went on.

" I made you comfortable upon my sofa, feeling sure that the morning would clear all this mystery away and that Ali would be able to spirit you away from my flat without anyone knowing that you had spent the night there. You understand. And in the morning I read in the paper of the Professor's death. The account dove-tailed in every way with your story of the night. Since that moment, Miss Manton, I have been your slave."

" My slave ? . . . Oh, Mr. Hassan. For God's sake tell me what all this means ? "

The man rose and stood over the chair in which his victim was rocking herself to and fro, her face buried in her hands. For a moment it seemed by the movements of Robert Hassan, by the unbridled passion that burned within his eyes, that he would have taken the girl in his arms. He bent low over the bronze gold hair then straightened his shoulders. The time when Robert Hassan would be able to take the full reward of the desperate game he was playing was not yet. It was a game that had only just begun.

The passion passed from his eyes, leaving only the mask of a devil, a beast of prey that has its victim at its mercy. When Barbara raised her eyes he was again bending over her, tenderness in every line of his sinuous body. One hand touched lightly the girl's shoulder.

" Your slave, Miss Manton, your friend. There is nothing in all the world that I would not do for you. For all that it means, I am glad, very glad, that it was Robert Hassan to whom you turned in your trouble. Oh, I know it's not the time to talk like this . . . but I must show you a reason for what I have done, for what I am doing now. One does not risk sacrificing all for a woman for whom he has no—— "

Barbara looked up. " And what is it that you have done ? "

" All that a man may do. You begged me that morning to help you to leave the country. I refused. I saw the folly of it. I wanted you to go to the authorities and make a clean breast of it all. Extenuating circumstances could be proved. May I ask you a question, one that may seem strange to you ? "

" It is all so strange."

" I want to know if with the dress that Clarkson made for you you were wearing anything of real antiquity, some embroidery, some trinket that came out of ancient Egypt. I have a reason for asking."

Barbara thought for a moment. "There was a necklet, a thin gold chain with a pendant of greenish stone. Professor Gault lent it to me from some antiquities he had bought in Wales. All that part is quite clear in my mind. He told me, I remember, that it was of a period about the Twenty-third Dynasty. Why do you ask?"

"Merely that I am looking for a reason for all this. Groping in the dark. We who know Africa know many things that you here in England do not even dream of. The influence, for instance, that certain objects have over their owners. The aura that surrounds things of the past. Murder and a long train of crime will follow a jewel through centuries. The Hope diamond, for instance."

"You mean . . . ?"

"I mean nothing. As I say, I am groping for any straw that may help us to the truth. If the necklet you speak of had been originally, back in the dim ages, in the possession of, say, a person of evil passions . . . I'm not saying that this is so, it is so difficult to separate truth from legend, but you will see my meaning."

The girl laughed strangely. "But this is England. The twentieth century. Things like that do not happen."

Again the expressive shrug of the shoulders.

"Then we must look elsewhere for an explanation of an inexplicable happening." The man leant forward and looked into the glowing coals. "That night—you remained in my flat throughout the day—I sent out and bought the clothes you are now wearing. They're poor ones, I'm afraid, but I did not want to court notice by going to any of the shops where I might be known. I bought them at a dress agency in the Edgware Road. The Eastern robe I burned, together with the sandals that were all muddied and stained. The necklet you speak of I did not see. Later, Ali drove us here, where you have been looked after by a woman whom we can trust, the wife of one of my captains."

"Sea captains?"

"Yes. This house is the headquarters of my Paris business, the Kadesh Produce Company, and two small steamers go between here and Alexandria. Both are my property, and the captains would not dream of asking any questions if I were to arrange for a lady passenger. They dare not for many reasons. We were to start immediately upon our arrival here, but your illness complicated matters."

"But I am well now, Mr. Hassan. And sane." The girl again rose. "There is some hideous mistake here. I remember nothing of all this. The authorities will help me."

"And I, Miss Manton? I who have been questioned a dozen times by police officers as to whether you came to me that night? The taxi man has told of driving a lady in Eastern dress from the Heath and dropping her at the corner of St. James' Street. I have shielded you, denied everything."

"But I must . . . must go back."

The flicker of the coals played strange tricks of light upon the face of Robert Hassan, threw his monstrous shadow upon the ceiling. He put out a hand, the brown finger-tips rested lightly on Barbara's wrist.

"May I tell you what you will go back to? A police court. A cell. Perhaps the scaffold. Forgive me if I seem brutal. The evidence is dead against you. Even you yourself must see that. You entered the museum alone and left it alone. Left it with Professor Gault lying dead. The police are creatures of fact. I do not think they would listen to any talk of the influence of a two thousand years old necklet."

Barbara passed her hand across her forehead. Her voice as she spoke was low, passionless. "Do you think, Mr. Hassan, that all this matters to me? I am just in a dream. Like a sleep-walker. You say I killed a man I loved best in the world next to Basil. I cannot, yet I must, believe it. And so there is no more peace for me anywhere in the whole world. You must see that I must go back. I would rather die than live with such a burden upon my soul. You see that, Mr. Hassan?"

Hassan had risen from his seat and was pacing to and fro across the little room. Glibly the lies came. He paused before Barbara and looked into her eyes.

"And I? I have become an accessory. I have no mind to pass my life in prison, Miss Manton. I have no disturbing thought to cause me to want to die rather than to live. We have both gone too far to think of turning back. I have acted foolishly perhaps, but I have acted for the best as I saw it. I have acted as you yourself asked me to act."

Barbara Manton sat silent, her eyes fixed upon the dancing flames. After all, would it not be better for her to do as this man suggested? Perhaps he would take her to Basil. Nothing mattered, and perhaps, after all, she owed a duty of sorts to Robert Hassan. Difficult of belief as was the story to which she had listened, what course was there for her but to believe it? Her remembrance of all that happened in the museum up to the finding of Professor Gault's body was at the best but hazy, and after that there was no remembrance at all. She asked herself how it was possible that she could forget a visit to Robert Hassan's flat . . . but, then, how was it that she remembered nothing at all? If she had not gone to St. James' Street she must have gone elsewhere. . . . No, there was nothing but to believe the unbelievable.

"I will take till the morning, if I may, Mr. Hassan, to decide. To-night I cannot think. If I can I will go to sleep." She held out her hand. "I thank you, Mr. Hassan, for all you have done. If I decide to go back to-morrow I can go alone; it will not be necessary to mention your part in my affairs."

"I am afraid, Miss Manton, that our fates are too firmly linked to think of separation. If you decide to face the music, then I, too, must face the music. . . . Good-night, Miss Manton."

Robert Hassan bent over the little hand and pressed his lips to it.

"Good-night, Mr. Hassan."

The next moment Barbara Manton was alone—alone with her thoughts.

Ali, who had been awaiting the return of his master in the room below, looked up from the papers that were strewn upon the desk at which he was seated.

"The lady was amenable?"

Robert Hassan sank into a chair facing his servant and smiled. It was a smile that even the astute Ali could not read.

"It all depends what you call amenable. Mix me a drink, Ali. I need it."

"Perhaps, then, the lady was difficult?"

"A little, Ali, a little. What precisely did you say the dope was that you gave her?"

"Cannabis Indica and hyoscin. Harmless but potent. Miss Manton's brain is, and will be for some days to come yet, very vague as to what has happened. Anything you care to suggest to her she will accept without question. Time and space are annihilated. Yesterday is a week ago, a year if you like to suggest that it is. Memory is dead. Miss Manton's brain is a virgin field upon which you may sow any seed you please."

Hassan nodded and set down his empty tumbler. "There is no danger? Will it be necessary to give further doses?"

Ali smiled enigmatically. "I am sending tea up to Miss Manton in an hour. Mrs. Pemberton tells me that the effect shows signs of wearing off rather sooner than I expected. I think a—shall we say a little sweetener in Miss Manton's tea this evening might be expedient."

"You swear it is safe?"

"For her, yes. For us, should Miss Manton become normal before she is got out of the country, no. I would not hurt a hair of Miss Manton's head for all the gold in Egypt."

"I didn't mean quite that, Ali. I meant——"

"I understand, sir. Miss Manton is very beautiful. Fate played into our hands last night in Hampstead. If it deals further cards—hearts for instance—for you, it is none of my affair. While Miss Manton lies hidden, the police will not look elsewhere to solve the mystery of Storm House. I think, sir, that a single purpose for the present would be wise."

"In what way?"

Ali shrugged his shoulders. "Have I not said that Miss Manton is very beautiful? I mean that it would not do for one to allow one's heart to run away with one's head. You have told Miss Manton that all this happened a week ago and not last night?"

Robert Hassan nodded slowly. His eyes again took on the slumbrous passion that had held them as he had stood looking down at Barbara's bowed head but a few minutes since. Ali regarded his master closely. It was he who broke the silence.

"It would not do for the police to become interested in us just now," he said. "Quite apart from the Hampstead affair. I think Harris was shadowed this evening. I fancy we will have to stick to the legitimate for a little while. Heroin is not on the schedule of the Kadesh Produce Company."

But Robert Hassan was not listening. He sat looking before him, his thoughts evidently far away. After a few moments he looked at his watch and rose. Then took up his hat and coat.

"Harris?" he said.

Ali looked gravely at him. "Eighteen ounces of the stuff on him. He rang me up a little while back telling me that he had his suspicions that he was being followed. I told him to drop the stuff, but you know what Harris is. I'm feeling rather anxious about him."

Robert Hassan rose. "Then I'll leave Miss Manton in your hands, Ali. I've one or two things to clear up at St. James' Street. I shall be back by ten. Where should I find Harris, do you think?"

Ali glanced at the clock. "He should be in the café in Dean Street . . . that is unless——"

"Oh, don't croak, Ali. I'll be back at ten."

Hassan closed the door softly behind him and made his way down the steep stairs and out into the street. He was not altogether at ease. The elation that he had felt at being in possession of one of the Stones of Khor was fading in the light of everyday, matter-of-fact life. After all, one stone did not mean the finding of the treasure of Memphis, and surely there was enough wealth hidden away in the bales of cotton with their cores of heroin and cocaine which his obliging agents in Alexandria stamped with the harmless trading mark of the Kadesh Produce Company. Robert Hassan, bearing in mind what Ali had said as to their most trusted agent being followed, was asking himself whether he were not sacrificing the substance for the shadow.

True, there was Barbara. Since the first time Hassan had met the girl, in Vera Peacock's studio, the man's passionate southern blood had been fired at her pale beauty. And yet, as he made his way through the murk of Limehouse Causeway, he was asking himself whether the game were really worth the candle. There crept into his mind a doubt whether fate, whom he agreed with Ali had played into their hands, had not in fact forced him into a position which bristled with difficulties.

The murder of Professor Gault was a thing of no moment to a man of the calibre and descent of Robert Hassan. It was merely an incident, one of the many blood-stained episodes that had followed the Stones of Khor throughout the centuries. He supposed that he ought to consider himself lucky that Barbara Manton should have proved so good a red herring across the trail of his crime. But now he was almost wishing that he and Ali had been allowed to take their chance unaided by so fortuitous a happening as Barbara Manton's coming to the museum. He would pit his wits against those of Scotland Yard as he had pitted them for the last few years in his traffic in drugs. Ali and he would have found a way . . . but now he had to confess that Barbara Manton, for all the charm of her, had certainly complicated matters.

Hassan left the underground at Charing Cross and made his way through Leicester Square into Dean Street. Ali's reference to Harris still rankled, and he was anxious to set at rest any doubts as to the safety of his agent.

But Harris was not in the café. Bonsant, the proprietor, had not seen him. No, monsieur, not since the night before. Yes, monsieur, it was most unusual. If monsieur would leave a message for Monsieur 'Arris . . .

As Hassan left the café his premonition that all was not as it should be weighed deeper upon him. Fatalist to the core, the man felt his world slipping from under his feet. He hailed a taxi and was driven to St.

James' Street, being set down by the corner of the palace and going on towards his rooms on foot.

It was as he waited on the curb for a string of vehicles to pass that he saw the police officer. There was no point duty on the spot immediately below his chambers, and yet the man in uniform walked up and down, up and down the few yards before the entrance hall. Hassan, cautious as his mode of life ever demanded, drew back into the shelter of a doorway and, glancing up, saw that there was a light in the window of his dining-room.

Cool as the man usually was, there was something sinister in the air of this February night, something that whispered to him that the net was being tightly drawn about him, and that he must use well what little time remained to him if he were to escape its meshes. Once, through the instrumentality of his activities in the drug traffic or through last night's work in Hampstead, his secret life should become known, the murder of Professor Gault would cease to be a mere incident, would become a thing of vast import that would lead to the gallows. And above all else Robert Hassan loved life and the things of life.

He felt the little lump over his breast pocket that was the Stone of Khor. He thanked his gods that he had not left that in his flat. For this meant flight, and Heaven alone knew when it would be safe for him to return. If only Maspar in Cairo read aright his cable to the " Green Figs," and if he acted with his usual intelligence in managing his end of the affair, within a few weeks the Stones of Khor would have been united and have given up their secret of such riches as would make of their owner a new Monte Christo. And with these thoughts there came thoughts of the girl alone with Ali in the warehouse by the river, and a wild exhaltation took him. Robert Hassan's lips creased in a grim smile. If flight it was to be, it must be swift. And he would not go alone.

A shadow detached itself from a near-by doorway, and, keeping well up to the walls of the houses, slipped into the recess where Hassan was standing.

"That you, Mr. Hassan?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"It's Burney, sir. Ted Burney. They've got Harris, sir. Got him with the goods. Came on to your place over there half an hour ago. Search warrant."

"Thanks, Burney, for waiting to warn me. I'm afraid I might have stumbled into the trap if I hadn't been hung up here by the traffic."

"That's all right, sir. Hang together, sir, in a case like this. I was wondering, sir, whether they've found the Limehouse address among your papers up there." He nodded towards the lighted windows.

The other man started. That had not for the moment occurred to him. The Limehouse address. Expert searchers could hardly fail to locate the small safe in the wall, and the decoding of his papers would be but a matter of hours. Not alone the Limehouse address but all Robert Hassan's life laid bare. His brain working quickly, he saw the police within twenty-four hours at the most at the warehouse by the river, the discovery of Barbara Manton. . . . He pressed money into the hand of the man who had risked his own skin to warn him, and, leaving the doorway, walked slowly down towards the palace.

He hailed a cab at the foot of St. James' Street and was driven to Blackfriars. There was nothing approaching panic in the movements of Mr. Robert Hassan. He had lived too long on the edge of the crater to be disturbed by a little smoke. The arrest of Harris had in a way cleared the air of confusing issues and left him but the one path to take. His preparations would be quickly made. Any one of the skippers who had made such large profits out of him would help him now. They would be far too afraid for their own skins to do otherwise. Exposure for Robert Hassan meant exposure for them all.

Yes, now that the battle was joined, he would fight against Scotland Yard tooth and nail. He was sorry to have to bid farewell to the joys of London, but, after all, Cairo was not too bad to one who knew the Egyptian city as Hassan knew it. And, surrounded by the loyalty of his own people, he could afford to laugh at the police forces of all the world.

And so Robert Hassan lit a cigarette and leant back on the cushions of the cab curiously at ease with himself. And if, in the wisps of fragrant smoke that curled upwards from his cigarette he saw any pictures, they would be of a sun-kissed land where his family were as chiefs, of stores of gold and precious stones in the desert . . . and of a girl whose pale beauty almost maddened him.

The veneer of civilisation was slipping from Robert Hassan. The wild blood of his savage ancestry was calling . . . calling across hot wastes of sand.

CHAPTER VI

It was in the thin light of a February dawn that Barbara awoke for the second time to her world of confusion. The headache from which she had suffered upon the previous evening had left her, but coherent and connected thought was not yet hers. It was as though she had newly emerged, trembling, fearful, from some hideous nightmare, some vision of the darkness in which horror had been piled upon horror, culminating in the thought that she had in some incomprehensible way been connected with the death of Basil's father. That she had been blood guilty she did not for one moment believe. That way, she told herself, madness lay. Instead there came to her a thought that amounted almost to conviction that there was somewhere in the darkness that lay about her a way out of this terrible thing that had come to her.

And though memory was grievously at fault as to what had happened at Storm House upon that night, which for all she knew might have been yesterday or last week or last year, yet little things that Robert Hassan had said to her upon her previous awakening remained with her, and to the best of her poor ability the girl ran these things over in her mind.

There had been something said of going away . . . to Alexandria, was it not? Upon one of the boats owned by Robert Hassan. She had never known till then that the dilettante of the Chelsea studios had owned boats or that he was connected in any way with business. Would it not be as well after all if she were to fall in with his suggestion? Hassan was at any rate her friend and Basil's friend. If what he had told her were true, and there was surely no logical reason for her to doubt him, then she might find herself confronted with insurmountable difficulties in convincing the authorities that she was guiltless. Any defence must necessarily be, taking into account the evidence against her, upon the lines of insanity. Surely the asylum was to be dreaded equally with the gaol. . . . *Detained during His Majesty's pleasure.* The words beat themselves into her brain with a curious insistency.

The girl threw back the coverings of the couch and rose to her feet. Thankfully she noticed that her weakness had passed with her headache. If only her mind were as sound as her body she would have little to fear for the battles that she knew lay before her.

She walked steadily to the window and looked out. The street was narrower than she had thought, just merely a little passage-way between high warehouse walls and leading out into a wider thoroughfare at the corner of which stood the public-house that she had seen the night before. To the right, a few yards only, was what appeared to be a wharf, and beyond that the masts and spars of shipping and the grey waters of the river, over which an early-morning fog lay in patches like puffed-up balls of cotton wool. From the direction of the wharf there came the clanking of a derrick chain, the occasional hooting of a syren.

The click of the lock in the door behind her caused Barbara to turn. Standing just within the door was a woman, a woman of perhaps forty years, primly dressed, and holding in her hands a tray containing food. The aroma of fragrant coffee that sent Barbara's mind back to a certain night in Vera Peacock's studio came to her nostrils, and to her delight the girl found that she was really hungry. The woman placed the tray upon the table and dropped a little old-fashioned curtsey.

"I am Mrs. Pemberton, miss. . . ."

Barbara remembered Hassan had spoken of the wife of one of his captains who had looked after her during her illness. She held out a hand and smiled.

"It has been good of you to give so long a time to poor little me. How many days was I unconscious, Mrs. Pemberton, and did I talk a great deal of nonsense?"

Mrs. Pemberton busied herself with the arranging of the tray. It would have been clear to a more alert observer that the woman welcomed the opportunity of averting her face from the frank eyes of the girl.

"If you will excuse me, miss, I'd rather not talk. Mr. Hassan said as how it would be better for you not to exert—his very words, miss—exert yourself. And that being so, and bearing in mind Mr. Hassan, miss, perhaps you'll be so kind as to excuse me."

Barbara nodded. She was already anxious to raise the silver cover from the dish upon the tray and to drink some of that richly-smelling coffee.

"Very well, Mrs. Pemberton. Perhaps I could have a paper. One gets so out of touch with the world in a week."

Again the woman turned aside, and this time the significance of the action was not lost upon Barbara Manton. A little furrow of thought appeared between her brows. Doubts were crowding upon her, vague but insistent. There was something not quite right, not quite straight about Mrs. Pemberton. Something not quite right about the story that Robert Hassan had told her.

"Very well, Mrs. Pemberton. Perhaps it would be as well not to trouble until Mr. Hassan returns. Do you expect him?"

"He returned last night, miss. He was late."

The woman made again her awkward curtsey and backed towards the door. Clearly Mrs. Pemberton was not at all loath to leave the presence of the girl with the questioning eyes. Barbara, too, was glad to be alone so that she could think. She watched the door close behind the gawky form, and bit thoughtfully into a slice of toast.

Not yet had Barbara any real doubts of the man who had, at so great a danger to himself, stood her friend, but the strangeness of the story he had told her left her wondering. Mrs. Pemberton's manner had had its effect upon her, and she hoped that she had not said too much to the woman. With the return of her bodily strength things were appearing to her in a new light, a saner light. Perhaps Robert Hassan himself was suffering from delusions. A strange man, Barbara had always thought him, and one who, if the gossip of

Bohemia did not lie, was at times addicted to drugs. Curious stories came to the girl of the man having been seen in Limehouse in company with Orientals and Arab sailor men. . . .

If only she could get hold of a paper. A week is a long time, and there would be sure to be something in the press with regard to the death of Professor Gault—if indeed the whole affair were not the delusion of Robert Hassan's brain. . . . Hope sprang again into the girl's heart. The meal over, she turned again to the window. The fog had crept up during the last quarter of an hour and now lay thick upon the wharf. To her ears came the rumble of lorries over cobbles and the eternal clatter of the winch of the derrick. Men in their working clothes came and went in and out of the public-house. Women with marketing baskets slung on their arms passed along the street beneath her. Children shouted and played in the gutters. . . .

And a look of dawning bewilderment came into the eyes of Barbara Manton. She glanced at the calendar which still showed the date it had shown the evening before when she had talked with Robert Hassan. Saturday, February 19th. If the calendar were true, then to-day would be Sunday. And if to-day were Sunday, why were the derricks working and why were women marketing ? Why, too, although Barbara had but the haziest idea as to the licensing laws of the country, why were men going into and coming from the "Good Intent" public-house at this time in the morning ?

The suspicions that had been born of Mrs. Pemberton's manner returned to her strengthened by this new discovery. Doubts that had been but vague began to assume definite shape. Robert Hassan must soon come to her to know the decision she had promised him the night before. And that decision would not, she told herself, be to that gentleman's liking. A small thing, this of the calendar, but her intuition told her that it was at least something definite to go upon, some foundation upon which to build her structure of hope. She must temporise with the man who had her under his charge and a way would open out to her. There should be no running off to Alexandria now. And then sudden resolve took her.

Why should she wait the coming of Robert Hassan? Why risk any further conversation with the man? Away from him it seemed to Barbara as though her brain functioned more fully, more satisfactorily. Now, while she was captain of her own soul, she would take the initiative. She crossed the room and tried the handle of the door. She had not heard Mrs. Pemberton turn the key, but the door was fast locked. But Barbara, strong in her new resolve to take her affairs into her own hands, was not to be deterred.

With the table knife that she had used for her breakfast, the girl whittled a small aperture in the panel by the lock, and into this inserted the point of the poker which she took from the fire-place. A few wrenches, and the woodwork splintered and cracked, and the cheap lock fell away. A moment later Barbara Manton was standing upon the landing outside the room in which they would have her believe she had lain ill for seven days. It had evidently been at the top of the house which, judging from her remembrance of her view down into the street, could be of no great height. Above her in the slope of the ceiling there was what appeared to be a trap door leading to a loft, perhaps, or out on to the roof. Across a square landing a narrow and steep flight of stairs led steeply downwards. Leaning over the low banister, Barbara listened.

All was silent. The stairs led down into gloom. She stood undecided. If her suspicions were true ones, what dangers might not lie in wait for her? Then, taking her courage in her hands, she placed one foot on the stairs, and, after a pause at the creak it made, continued her descent. The landing below was reached and safely passed. The second, which Barbara thought must be one floor above the street level, was within reach when she paused. Terror gripped at her.

From the direction where lay the street came the sound of blows, as though someone were trying to beat in the panels of a door. Silence followed for a moment, then there was the noise of a chair being thrown over in the room to her right, the door was flung open, and a man leapt for the stair head. Barbara shrank back against the broken plaster of the wall as she recognised in the man Robert Hassan. In the doorway, framed in the lintel, Mrs. Pemberton stood, her face chalky white. The woman had been crying, for there were marks of tears on her cheeks. She gazed blankly at Barbara as though not in any way surprised to see her there on the stairs.

"Mrs. Pemberton . . ."

"Hush, Miss Manton. Don't speak. . . . Oh, this is terrible."

A pistol-shot stabbed the silence of the hall-way downstairs. Barbara saw Robert Hassan leap up the few shallow steps. He was hatless and without collar, and the blood ran redly from a cut upon his cheek. Behind him the girl saw the helmeted head of a policeman . . . saw Hassan take aim and fire . . . the spurt of flame shot wickedly through the gloom of the landing.

And then Hassan turned and saw Barbara, and for a moment he hesitated. He glanced back down the stairs across the form of the constable that lay sprawling shapelessly across the narrow strip of linoleum. If there were others below they feared to follow, for there was no movement for perhaps a minute, then again the street door was slammed. Hassan ran to the girl and caught her in his arms as she swooned forward.

"They've come, Miss Manton . . . come for you. In a minute or two they'll storm the stairs in force. Quick, Ali, she's fainting. . . ."

These things Barbara heard as she slipped into unconsciousness. She felt arms like steel about her. Felt herself lifted up . . . carried rapidly she knew not where.

Five minutes later a squad of police from Leman Street Station was swarming over the rooms of Robert Hassan's headquarters. And in a basement not fifty yards away from them Ali and Hassan sat in darkness, between them on the floor the unconscious form of Barbara Manton.

"Close shave that, Ali. Burney couldn't have been watching very well to let the police get past him like that. I'd been expecting them ever since last night, but it was a bit sudden when they did come. Another half-hour and we'd have been gone. Seems you were right about Harris, Ali."

The Arab nodded. Hassan could just see the movement in the deep gloom of their retreat. "And yet, sir, from another point of view things could hardly have happened better."

" You mean the girl ? "

" I mean the girl. Mrs. Pemberton thinks she was suspicious. This will convince her."

Robert Hassan was for a moment silent. Then, " I thought of that," he said. " The police fit in with my story about the warrant out for her. A raid, my dear Ali, would seem to have its advantages. There's going to be trouble, Ali, big trouble. When can Pemberton sail ? "

" This afternoon, his wife tells me."

Hassan rose from a bale upon which he had been sitting and walked across the basement to where a strip of dim light showed through the chink in a shutter. He held up a hand in warning as he placed his ear to the aperture.

" Like a lot of hounds who've lost the scent," he said, and resumed his seat upon the bale.

CHAPTER VII

A STRANGE, fantastic dream. A dream of polished floors, of swaying figures, of lilting music and flowers . . . and Basil. How good of Robert to drive them home to Chelsea. Such a long way in this horrible fog. How splendidly Ali drives. . . .

Barbara Manton narrowed her eyes. Yes, there was Ali's head against the fog, but this was not Robert Hassan's Daimler. How cold it was—how dark.

The girl, now fully herself, looked stealthily about her. She had been lying upon a rug thrown over two or three bales of what might be raw cotton. Around her other bales all marked with a crude stencil mark that looked in the uncertain light to be *K. E. Co., Cairo*, piled themselves up to the rafters. The place was evidently a store-room of some sort, a basement, or, to be correct, a semi-basement, for the one window, through which all the light there was came, was set high up in the wall facing her and looked out apparently on to ground level. And at this window by the half-opened shutter, standing upon one of the bales, was Ali, his eyes level with the lower sash of the window, his turbaned head, steady and immovable as one of his own desert pyramids . . . watching.

Barbara lay back quietly upon her bed of rugs and closed her eyes. Here, for a little while, feigning sleep, she could think. Hitherto, affairs had marched far too quickly for consecutive or considered thought. She remembered the fight on the stairs, the pistol-shot, and the huddled form of the police officer, dead perhaps. She saw again the white face of Mrs. Pemberton as that good lady had stood in the doorway on the landing, wringing her hands and crying softly to herself. Dimly she remembered being lifted and carried, and after that only blackness.

Gone, now, from the girl's mind were all thoughts of returning and facing the music, even were it possible to do so. Brought up in a sheltered middle-class home, kept sedulously from contact with the rough edges of life, the thought of the publicity and the sordid surroundings of a police court appalled her. Even if, in all innocence, she had been the cause of Professor Gault meeting his death, nothing that she might do or say now could bring her old friend back to life. Nothing now for her, but to rely upon the good offices of Robert Hassan. Anything rather than inactivity and the brooding thoughts which inactivity brought in its train.

Consider the matter in what light she might, think as she might as to the wisdom or otherwise of the step she was taking, there was no other way. All other roads were closed to her. As Robert Hassan had said the night before, they had gone too far to go back, to retreat from the position they had taken up.

Vaguely as she mistrusted the man, there was no choice open to her but to rely upon him. The fears that had been allayed by her suspicions of Mrs. Pemberton now crowded back upon her in full force as she remembered the policeman lying upon the stairs. How, now, could she doubt the truth of the story that Hassan had told her, how dream for one minute but that the police had come to the house to execute the warrant that Robert Hassan had told her had been issued for her arrest ? How, too, could she repay Hassan for the fight that he had put up so that she might win to safety ? Not, surely, by playing the traitor to him, for if she went back she could not now conceal Hassan's share in the affair, could not deny that he had committed murder perhaps on her behalf. It was as though she had become a pawn in some game that fate was playing. Freedom of action was no longer hers. Perhaps too, all this would lead her to Basil.

" Ali."

The man at the window turned.

" What time is it, Ali ? "

" Four o'clock, Miss Manton."

The girl was silent. Little to be gained by asking this loyal servant anything. It was Ali who spoke.

" Mr. Hassan asked me to give you this when you awoke." The man felt in the breast pocket of his jacket and handed Barbara a letter, switching on a small electric torch as he did so and directing its ray upon the sheet. Sitting up, Barbara read :

" DEAR MISS MANTON,

" You have seen now how quickly my fears for you have materialised. I did not think they would act so quickly. The choice is open to you and I want you to follow your own inclinations, to do what you think right without thought or consideration for me. If you elect to return and give yourself up to the authorities, Ali has instructions to escort you to a spot from which you can get back to Chelsea. Although I would do all that I could to help you, it will be impossible for me, for obvious reasons, to give evidence on your behalf. Personally I am far too deeply involved to risk return. The man I shot to prevent your arrest may be dead. If so, then nothing could save me from the gallows. And, fatalist as I am, I do not believe in putting one's head within the lion's jaw. But, as I have said, I want you to do what you think right.

"R. H."

Barbara looked up from the letter. By the half-open shutter Ali stood immovable, his face dimly lit by reflected light, inscrutable as the monuments of his native land. And as the girl looked at him there came into her mind all the suspicions, all the doubts of the morning. Something seemed to whisper in her ear that, choose as she might, her course was already mapped out for her.

For a tense moment or two she thought—thought hard, bringing to bear upon her situation all her faculties. She would take her choice, and that choice should lie along the road that would take her from England and the horror of police courts. She would, willingly, take the course that, deep in her own mind, she felt that Hassan intended she should take, choose as she might. If, as she suspected, there were a plot against her, she would have a better chance of combating it if she accompanied Robert Hassan as a willing agent rather than as a prisoner.

"I am to take instructions from mademoiselle."

"To escort me back to Chelsea or . . . ?"

" Or to take you to where a boat is waiting."

" A boat to take me where, Ali ? "

" To be my master's most honoured guest."

Barbara did not at once answer. She watched the inscrutable face before her. She might as well have attempted to read the eternal riddle of the Sphinx.

" You will tell your master, Ali, that I am waiting his convenience."

A look of relief for an instant ruffled the calm of Ali's features. It was but vague, momentary, but Barbara, as she looked, told herself that it was as though the man had been spared a difficult, perhaps a distasteful task. Ali bowed his head.

" Mademoiselle, if I may be permitted to say so, has chosen wisely. I regret that mademoiselle must remain here alone. It is safer, and I have preparations to make. At seven I will return. There is fruit there, mademoiselle, upon the shelf, and wine. I would have made coffee, but it would not be safe to light a fire. Mademoiselle would be advised to remain quiet. I am sorry that it will not be possible for me to leave you a light except this for an emergency. Mademoiselle will give me her promise. It is for her own safety as well as that of my master."

The Arab held out to Barbara the electric torch.

"Except in emergency, Ali," she said as she took it. " I promise."

Ali stood upon the bale and quietly pulled to the shutter across the window. With a bow he left the room. Barbara heard a well-oiled key turn in the lock.

For a little while she lay still looking up into the dim shadows and the cobweb festoons of the warehouse ceiling. The half darkness was conducive to thought, the softness of the bales upon which she was lying soothing to her tired limbs. But her thoughts before long took the form of a circle, leading nowhere but to conjecture, and after a few minutes she rose and mounted the bale upon which Ali had been standing and cautiously opened the shutter for a few inches. Outside the window, level with her eyes, was a pavement, the pavement evidently of a street but little used, for although Barbara stood at the aperture shutter for perhaps ten minutes, no one passed. From somewhere near came the sound of the life of the river muted by the fog. It was fully two hours before Hassan came to her.

"And so you have decided, Miss Manton ?"

"Yes, I have decided."

"And of your own free will. I do not force you to anything ?"

"Why do you ask ?"

The man threw out his hands before him. "Only that at some future time it might be as well if this matter were quite clear. But it does not matter. You are ready ?"

"Quite. Do we sail at once ?"

"If we sail at all. The river police are out, but Ali, I fancy, is more than their match. Come."

Robert Hassan held open the door and Barbara passed through into a passage, darker even than the basement she had just left. The thin ray of a torch in Hassan's hand showed her an opening in the flooring and the topmost step of a flight leading downwards. She drew back, hesitating.

" If you will permit me."

Robert Hassan passed her and led the way down the steps. A cool wind blew upwards, a wind tinged with the thousand and one smells of the river. The steps beneath her feet were slippery as though with slime, and in the distance the girl could hear the *lap lap* of water against piles. At the foot of the steps they came out on to a little platform of rotting wood against which the river washed. Hassan gave a low whistle.

Out from the fog that surrounded them there appeared the shape of a boat, a small boat with a turbaned man at the oars. Skilfully Ali piloted the craft up to the stairs, and with but a moment's hesitation Barbara took Hassan's hand and stepped aboard. Hassan followed, and with a gentle thrust of his foot against the little wooden landing-stage sent the boat gliding out into the stream, then took his place in the stern, head thrust forward as though he would pierce with his eyes the fog-bound mystery of the river. Ali sat motionless, his oars at rest in the row-locks. From across the water came the shrill of a whistle and the cries of men calling to each other. A long way away the voices seemed, as though in some other world beyond the curtain of mist that hid the little boat from its pursuers. And then, ever growing fainter, they died away, leaving the fugitives to silence, save for the oily *lap lap* of the little river waves against the gunwale of the boat. Robert Hassan laughed softly.

" Narrow squeak that, Ali. . . . Careful now. These river police are the very devil. Like an open road to them, this old stream, even in a fog. Easy now. . . ."

Ali bent to the oars. Cleanly the sweeps took the water, and Barbara felt that the boat beneath her was under way. Wraith-like wisps of fog floated past her. And through the gaps in the mist the hull of some craft, and, now and again, the looming grey silhouette of a wharf with derrick arms up-thrust. At a whispered word from his master the rower rested again upon his oars. No sound but the lapping of the river and the steady *drip drip* from the stationary oar-blades. Robert Hassan put his cupped hands to his lips and sent a cry out into the grey waste of waters, a low cry as of a gull that sobbed weirdly across the smothered river. Thrice was the cry repeated before an answering call came from somewhere to the left of them. The echoes took up the sound, sending it in curious cadences downstream.

Once more Ali bent to his oars and a few minutes' rowing brought them swirling beneath a shape that loomed large above their rocking cockle-shell of a boat. A rope ladder was thrown, and, assisted by Ali and Hassan, Barbara climbed over the side of some craft, the nature or dimensions of which she could not even guess at. Once only she hesitated.

A cry sent out at this last moment over the water would bring the river police hurrying to their prey. But Barbara, as she placed her foot upon the deck, told herself that she had thought that all out. Her decision had been taken. She allowed Hassan to take her arm and lead her across the slippery planks to where a companion-way yawned black in the grey mist. And Robert Hassan, who knew well when silence was golden, left her with a little bow but no word, and made his way back on deck.

Barbara threw her cloak, a shapeless garment that must have been Mrs. Pemberton's, upon the little shelf-like bed and sank into a chair. It was a tiny cabin but cheerful, with its generous skylight and its cheaply framed pictures and gay little chintzy hangings. A heavy rug of Eastern manufacture was upon the floor, and the place was in some way well warmed. Overhead the girl could hear the scraping of heavy boots upon the deck, the slither of ropes. Harshly shouted orders and the clank of chain and winch. Shadows came and went upon the glass of the skylight. And then silence, as though all work had been stopped . . . shouts in the distance . . . renewed activity aboard.

Perhaps the police had come upon them after all. Barbara ran to the small port-hole and drew aside the curtain. Nothing without but a sheer wall of impenetrable grey. She could hear the sound of oars rasping in row-locks and a shouted order to stand by. From somewhere above her head Barbara heard Robert Hassan's answering laugh of derision. The cruelty of it chilled her.

The vessel was quickly gathering speed. The shouting from the river became confused, muted, until at last it died away astern. Glancing down, the girl could see the ripples of water ebbing away from the ship's side as she slipped through the muddy water. She stood there watching the blurred shapes that rose up before her out of the fog to slip past and be lost in the smother. Here and there were the ochre splashes of some ship's lantern.

And Barbara Manton was still standing by the port-hole, when, after tapping gently and being bidden to enter, Robert Hassan came into the cabin.

"I rather think, Barbara, that on the whole we didn't manage that any too badly."

The girl noticed it. Shrank from the intimacy of it. It was the first time that Robert Hassan had called her by her Christian name. That it was no mere slip of the tongue but of deliberate intention she had no doubt, for the man had looked sidewise towards her as he had spoken as though to note the effect. And Barbara for the moment, allowed it to pass unremarked. Diplomacy above all else was necessary if she were ever to be able to unravel the tangle of her position.

"I suppose they had come for me. The police, I mean?"

Robert Hassan shrugged his shoulders. "Who else? They are acting in conjunction with the Leman Street men. You did me a sorry service when you came to my flat that night. . . . There, Barbara, I shouldn't have said that. I would not have had it happen otherwise for all the world—or to any other man." He glanced about the tiny cabin. "I am afraid you will have to wait upon yourself during our little voyage. I'm sorry to treat my guests so scurvily, but needs must. You see, Barbara, Mrs. Pemberton wasn't able to move quite so quickly as we were, and so the good lady was left behind. Captain Pemberton must sail without a wife this trip. Very happy, too, he seems about it."

Barbara turned again to the port-hole. There was something strange, something different about Robert Hassan. Always they had said in Chelsea that his was but a thin veneer of civilisation hiding the savage beneath. It was almost as though the man had been drinking, a failing that to Barbara's knowledge was not one of Robert Hassan's. There was in his attitude towards her a studied intimacy amounting almost to insolence that was foreign to the courteous manner he had always adopted. She thought again of the cold cruelty of the laugh she had heard on deck.

"Then Mrs. Pemberton will tell everything. Surely they can telegraph and stop the boat we are on when she gets to Gravesend or before she leaves the river for the open seas."

Robert Hassan smiled. Again the half-veiled affront was in his voice. "As you grow older, Barbara, you will learn that Robert Hassan is well served. Mrs. Pemberton will be discretion itself. Also her good husband tells me that the fog holds well past the Nore, and the night will be dark as the pit. No, Barbara, I fancy they will have their work cut out to catch the *Seamew.*"

There was a moment's silence. Barbara was still watching the water swirl past. She spoke over her shoulder.

"I do not care for anyone to call me Barbara," she said.

"A slip——"

"A slip that has occurred three times, Mr. Hassan. But we will let it pass. After all, the business that has brought us together is intimate enough for the exchange of Christian names. Fellow criminals need not be so squeamish."

The man looked at her narrowly. "I don't think I quite follow you," he said.

Barbara laughed. Her expression had hit some mark that she had had no idea of. Fellow fugitives from justice she had meant to say.

"We'll let that pass, too. Now can you tell me where we are going? This is one of your boats, Mr. Hassan?"

"Yes. We'll put ashore on the coast near Alexandria. We could not risk going up to the port. Then we can travel by easy stages down to my home. Once there you will be safe. Also, I trust the life of the desert for a month may be agreeable. A romantic spot, the desert."

"The desert. Romantic . . . yes, Mr. Hassan, but it almost frightens me. Alone there in the wastes with the thought of my . . . crime. . . ."

"The thought of all that will pass. The desert is a great healer. You trust me?"

"Of course I trust you. Are you not Basil's friend . . . and mine? Will we see Basil? Was he brought back for the inquest?"

For a moment Robert Hassan was non-plussed. Easy enough to state as a fact to the drugged mind of a girl that the inquest had taken place, that the Professor had been dead a week instead of two days, but it was another matter to be cross-examined by that same girl when the dulled eyes were clear, steady and unflinching, and seeming to burn into one's very soul. But glibly the lies came, as lies come always to the Robert Hassans of this world.

"There was no need. The case, if you will forgive me, was a simple one. The evidence was so clear. Besides, I doubt whether Basil could have been found. He had left Cairo, according to the *Daily Record*, and gone south. Not a difficult place to lose oneself in, the desert, Miss Barbara. . . . Besides . . ."

"Besides what, Mr. Hassan?"

"I was only wondering about something, whether it was true. About the reports that were current in Chelsea as to the engagement of a certain lady to Mr. Basil Gault."

She met his eyes unflinchingly, proudly. "Perfectly true, Mr. Hassan. There is no reason why you should not know. We became engaged on that night at the Savoyard when you drove us home to Vera's place. Oh——"

The girl broke off suddenly. She was staring at the fingers of her left hand. Hassan leant forward.

"What is it, Barbara?"

"My ring. The ring Basil gave me that night. Talking of him made me think of it. . . . A scarab."

"You mean you have lost it?"

Barbara nodded. "It must have dropped off as we came down the steps to the river. Or in the boat. It may be on the deck here on the *Seamew*. Have your men search for it, Mr. Hassan, please. I . . . I . . . prize it so much. I had it on when you came for me in the basement."

The eyes of the girl grew mistily tender. And at the thought that a man other than himself had the power to give birth to such a look in Barbara Manton's eyes, something in Hassan's brain seemed to snap. With an effort he regained his composure.

"Certainly. If it's aboard ship it will be found But——"

"But what, Mr. Hassan? It was a greenish scarab like a beetle with——"

"I wasn't thinking of the ring but at something that the ring brought to my mind."

"And that was . . . ?"

"Only that I have been wondering whether you have thought how this affair is going to affect your relations with Mr. Gault. It's no business of mine, but . . . well, I was wondering. That's all."

"I've thought of all that, Mr. Hassan. It's part of the reason why I agreed to your suggestion that I should come to Egypt."

The man's face grew darkly red. The veneer was fast falling away from Mr. Robert Hassan. "I had hoped," he began, then as though he had changed the trend of his thoughts, "I was going to ask you, Barbara, whether you would prefer to have your meals served here in your cabin or dine with us in the saloon. Captain Pemberton is a nice old fellow. The regrettable absence of his excellent wife robs you of a chaperone, but—— "

"I think, if you don't mind, I'll have my meals in here. I'm afraid I would not make very good company for Captain Pemberton or for you, Mr. Hassan."

The man bowed. "I'm disappointed . . . very disappointed. I had rather looked forward to this voyage that we are forced into taking together. It's lonely aboard ship—without friends."

Robert Hassan threw an emphasis into the last word and looked across to Barbara. The girl was still at the port-hole, her profile silhouetted against the grey oval of the opening. How beautiful, how wondrously beautiful she was, the love-light still in her eyes—love-light for Basil Gault. And, hearing no sound, she turned, and for one tense moment eye held eye across the tiny cabin, and there was no disguising the message that passed. At what she saw Barbara fell back a pace, her own eyes losing their stare . . . filling with fear.

"I wish, Mr. Hassan, that you would leave me. I . . . I . . . am not well."

Robert Hassan took a step forward. Bitterly he was regretting his lapse, bitterly regretting that Barbara should have turned at that very moment and read into his soul. Surely he could have waited until the bird was more securely trapped. But the unspoken secret that lay in that dark soul had been read, and nothing would ever expunge the memory of it from Barbara Manton. He walked towards the door. With his hand upon the latch he turned.

"I think, Barbara, that it would be as well if you wiped all thought of Basil Gault from your life. Better for your own peace of mind. Better for your own happiness. Basil is lost to you. It should not be difficult for Barbara Manton to find one to fill the void left by a departed lover."

Barbara heard the turn of the handle, the soft closing of the cabin door. Steps up the companion-way, a smothered oath as Hassan tripped over some obstruction upon the deck. And for some minutes after the man had left her she stood motionless, watching the water, her face set as though carved in marble. Then the fear that had grown upon her face as she had looked into Robert Hassan's eyes passed, and in its place there dawned a wonderful relief, a greatly-daring hope.

Barbara Manton was no coward. The one thing, the only thing, that had preyed upon her, that had weighed her down, was the thought that she had been responsible in some unaccountable manner for the death of her old friend. And now that Robert Hassan had showed her a glimpse of himself in his true colours, she felt that she was being made the scape-goat for someone, the pawn in some deeply laid plot, a plot that demanded her absence from England.

The coming of the police. Hassan's story. Her own distorted memories—all these still awaited explanation. But Barbara felt now that there was an explanation, that somewhere behind the darkened curtain of her brain the light was shining. More than ever now must she go to Egypt. More than ever now must she play a part, hide her true feelings, and wait for the moment to strike.

She took her seat at the little cabin table and cupped her chin in her hands.

Perhaps Hassan had not seen the effect that his words, and the look in his eyes, had roused in her. The cabin was but dimly lighted, and she had been standing with her back to the port-hole. If she kept a watch upon herself, the man might not know until it was too late that he was being duped. A difficult, an ignoble rôle to play, but for what a stake . . . Basil and her own peace of mind. An enemy known is an enemy already half beaten. Foolish, indeed, the player who before the game has well begun throws down his cards upon the table.

She rose from her seat, happy light of battle in her eyes, and crossed to the wash-basin that was fitted into the wall of the cabin. The chill of the water upon her face refreshed her, and by means of a pocket comb

Barbara coaxed into some sort of order the hair that fell in little tendrils about her brows. And the girl smiled as she took in the picture that the little mirror showed her.

A face, white and pinched, and with little half circles of grey beneath the eyes. A toque, evidently one of Mrs. Pemberton's, perched a trifle jauntily upon her curls. A cloak, that she had thrown aside when entering the cabin, also, without doubt, from the same good lady's wardrobe, with a cheap edging of fur. Shoes and stockings that had clearly been purchased by someone to whom the niceties of life counted as nothing. A skirt of drab colourless brown with East End crying aloud from every fold. A strange armour in which to play the part she had mapped out for herself. A search through Mrs. Pemberton's sea-going clothes, Barbara told herself, and a few busy hours with a needle would soon remedy that.

She unpinned the offending toque and threw it into the corner of the cabin, and, gathering the cloak closely about her neck, Barbara opened the door and passed up the companion-way stairs and out on to the deck.

The fog, as Captain Pemberton had said, showed no sign of lifting, and night was already folding her sable wings over the waters of London River. Here and there in the gloom phantom lights passed, and sometimes a distant glow of murky radiance showed where some loading or unloading was in progress. Barbara wondered whether, after all, the police would overhaul the *Seamew* and take her back to face her trial. Most devoutly she hoped not. The mystery that was about her would be cleared up in due course, but it would be by her own way and not by the way of the sordid ritual of a police court.

Adventure and the spirit of adventure was in the very air. In the fog, in the murky lights, in the promise of the Land of Romance to which she was journeying. After all, had it not been always her wish to see with her own eyes the glories that Basil had so often described to her? They had even spoken upon that never-to-be-forgotten night of Egypt as the place for a honeymoon. Strange that she should be travelling there . . . with Robert Hassan.

She hailed a sailor who was passing and asked him to find Mr. Hassan for her. She would wait for him there by the companion-way. And in a few moments Robert Hassan stood before her. Barbara smiled and held out a hand. The game had begun.

" I'm afraid I was churlish just now, Mr. Hassan. What you said about . . . about Basil was kindly meant. I know it was. But it hit me hard . . . just at that moment. You have been very good to me, Mr. Hassan, and we're going to be friends. Aren't we? "

Robert Hassan's eyes were alight with triumph as he bent over the little hand. As he pressed his lips to the spot where but a little while since Basil's ring had rested, a spasm as of acute pain passed over Barbara's face. But when the man raised his eyes they looked into smiling ones.

" And if I may change my mind, Mr. Hassan, I think I'd like to lunch with you and Captain Pemberton . . . and, please, Mr. . . . Robert, can you send a sailor ashore somewhere to do a little shopping? Look at my skirt, my shoes . . . these heels are absolutely indecent. Look."

And Barbara laughed and thrust out from beneath the hem of the shapeless skirt a tiny foot, the arched beauty of which thick stockings, and shoes three sizes too big, were powerless to disguise.

Nov. 7.59.
Srinagar Kashmir.
India.

CHAPTER VIII

TRAINED by her environment to welcome with open arms sensation of all and every kind, Vera Peacock was in her element. To use her own words addressed to a girl friend who had accompanied her to the inquest upon Professor Gault, she was "thrilled, my dear, thrilled to the very core."

Curled up in the corner of the divan set beneath the brocade-curtained north window of her studio, Vera was reading the account of the proceedings in which she herself had played no inconsiderable a part. Bizarre, strangely beautiful, she looked with the light from the silk-shaded lamp upon her short copper-coloured curls and piquant little face, her slim boyish figure in a closely-fitting black frock of many-guinead simplicity, made a sharply defined silhouette against the heaped up cushions of lemon yellow. Upon the Turkish table by her side there lay cigarettes and sundry editions of the evening papers, but of them all it was the *Planet* that gave the little lady the keenest enjoyment.

The reading of the evidence to which she had listened throughout the length of a fatiguing day was of little interest to her, but the *Planet's* description of "Miss Vera Peacock, whose paintings at the last International Exhibition called forth much praise from a small but eminently distinguished coterie . . . was wearing a smart toque and tunic of astrachan, in the belt of which a small bunch of Neapolitan violets added a charming touch of colour to the dull atmosphere of the coroner's court . . . " gave the girl a keen thrill of pleasure. She called to mind the hush of expectancy that had come over the ill-lit sordid room as she had left her seat upon the back benches to take her place in the witness-box. It had been very pleasant.

The *Planet* slipped from her hand to the floor, and Vera, leaning back upon her cushions, gave herself up to the memories of the proceedings. The great bare walls of the room in which the inquest had been held, the grimy children gathered scare-eyed about the door, the stolid faces of the jury, the bald spot upon the head of the coroner that had almost made her laugh . . . and the set, white face of Basil Gault as he had given his evidence and listened to the verdict.

She could see the fire in his eyes, the clenched hands as he had commenced to speak, to protest against the verdict that stamped the girl he loved with the brand of Cain. How the fine lines of the face, bronzed by the Egyptian sun, had hardened as the coroner had stopped the impassioned flow of his words. Basil Gault had bowed stiffly and walked from the court. And Vera, following hard upon his heels, out into the sordid street, had found him gone.

Of course everyone had felt sorry for Basil, but, after all, Vera was asking herself, what other verdict could the jury have brought in ? There was no other possible course for the twelve men to take. Vera herself had felt, when telling of Barbara's hurried departure from the Albert Hall upon the night of the ball in response to the dead man's message, that she was helping to place the noose about the white throat of her friend. But her evidence, when all was said and done, had been immaterial. The verdict would have been the same.

Mrs. Fulton had deposed to letting Miss Manton into Storm House and to finding her master dead in the museum when she went there in the morning to sweep and dust. The taxi driver, too, who had taken her out to Hampstead, gave evidence that he had waited an hour for his fare, had knocked and, getting no answer, and having already been paid, had turned his cab and hurried back to Knightsbridge to pick up the home-going revellers from the ball.

But perhaps the most damning fact where Barbara Manton was concerned was her disappearance. The inquest had been postponed to allow of Basil's return, and during that period, all but a fortnight, the police had combed England from end to end, and search parties, both official and amateur, had infested the Heath day and night. Enterprising newspapers had offered rewards. Barbara's photograph and—by kind permission of Mr. Clarkson—a replica of the dress she had been wearing had been thrown on every cinema screen from Aberdeen to Truro. All to no avail. If the historic Heath of Hampstead had opened and swallowed her up, Miss Barbara Manton could not have more successfully, more utterly, disappeared.

And it was the costume that not only added colour and romance to the mystery, but made the affair more alluring, more mysterious than ever. It was conceivable that a young lady wearing ordinary, every-day clothes might lie hidden for even longer than a fortnight, but that anyone attired as a lady of the court of the Pharaoh should pass unnoticed among the teeming millions of London baffled everyone. Barbara Manton was the talk of every club, every servants' hall, every dinner-table from Mayfair to Fulham.

From the moment that Mrs. Fulton closed the door of Storm House behind her, all trace of Barbara Manton had been lost. Imprints of the tiny Egyptian sandals, identified by Mr. Clarkson himself, were found leading up to, but none leading away from, the house. And Storm House had been, one might say, searched brick by brick, timber by timber, and had been in continuous possession of the police since the finding of the body of Professor Gault.

Vera Peacock lit a cigarette and again took up the paper. The bell of the outer hall rang, followed by a tap on the studio door. Vera's maid entered.

"Mr. Basil Gault, miss."

Vera swung off the divan, searched for and found the little high-heeled slippers that had fallen off, thrust her feet into them.

"In here, please, Panton. And serve coffee."

The girl ran to the mirror, patted her hair into place, and turned as Basil entered the room. He was dressed as he had been at the inquest, and his bronzed face was drawn into fine lines of suffering. Looking at him Vera told herself that he had the appearance of a man who had walked for hours, walked with no object but to deaden thought. She motioned him to a chair and the man sank down wearily.

"You have dined, Basil? Let Panton cut you a——"

Basil waved aside the suggestion. "I haven't eaten since this morning. I feel as though I never want to eat again." He laughed a hard little laugh. "But that's all rot, isn't it, Vera? Of course we'll have to eat and sleep and do all the other silly things that keep us alive. God only knows why we want to go on living. Some of us, that is."

The girl leant forward and looked into the troubled eyes. "Surely you of all people want to go on living."

Basil looked up sharply. "What do you mean? . . . Oh, that I have got to find Barbara. Yes, I have got to find Barbara."

The man leant across and took a cigarette from Vera's silver box. There was silence for a moment, broken only by the gentle hiss from the cafeta which Panton had set upon the table. Then,

"Vera."

The girl paused in the act of arranging the tiny cups and looked up. "Well?"

"What do you think of the Robert Hassan affair?"

"I'm afraid that poor Barbara has put everything out of my mind. Every other trouble seems to be so small. Something to do with cocaine, wasn't it? I can't imagine Mr. Hassan . . . can you?"

"Robert Hassan, Vera, is a fiend, a devil. I had a few words with Inspector Dawson who is conducting the case, and it appears that Scotland Yard has had its eye upon him for many a day. One of these Eastern brutes whose wealth has bought a thin veneer to cover their savagery. Besides, Barbara's case is part and parcel, I imagine, of Robert's Hassan's case."

Vera Peacock drew a chair up towards Basil. " What do you mean ? "

" You haven't read the reports of the case, I suppose. Not the inquest, but the report of the appearance at Bow Street of a man called Harris ? "

Vera shook her head.

Basil took his wallet from his pocket and drew from it a newspaper cutting. He handed it across the little Turkish table to the girl.

" Read that, will you, Vera ? "

Wonderingly she took the paper over to where the light of the lamp would fall upon it.

" It now seems fairly obvious " (she read) " that Robert Hassan, against whom there is a warrant for arrest on the charge of smuggling drugs into this country, was at the head of a large organisation comprised of both men and women who acted as agents in this noxious traffic. A workman employed in the vicinity of Barter Wharf at Limehouse Reach has come forward with the information that upon the morning of the raid upon the warehouse of the Kadesh Produce Company of Cairo and Alexandria, he picked up on the wharf a ring of foreign workmanship, a man's ring that had recently been made smaller to fit the finger of a woman. This ring is now in the possession of the police, and it is expected that in due course a full description of it will be issued. It is quite evident that Robert Hassan's business, cloaked under the name of the Kadesh Produce Company, an exceedingly lucrative affair of much more sinister activities. The man Harris who was arrested in Soho the night before the raid will make his second appearance before the magistrates to-morrow."

Vera Peacock handed the paper back to Basil. "Well?"

Basil rose and walked across the room to the door. He opened it, glanced out into the passage and closed it again. Then returned to Vera with an apologetic smile.

"It's not that I distrust Panton," he said, "but one cannot be too careful. This case has caught hold of the public fancy, and I wouldn't blame Panton a little bit if she strained her ears. But she isn't. I beg Panton's pardon."

"You were going to say . . ."

"About this ring. I've seen it. It's a scarab of the Nineteenth Dynasty that my father gave me the year I came down from Oxford. I . . . I left it with Barbara the night I went away."

"The night of the fog . . . here. . . ."

"Yes." Basil broke off and looked about the room. His eyes narrowed. "Hassan stood over there by the window telling that loathsome Ali how to make his hell brew of coffee. God, if he were only standing there now!"

"But tell me, Basil . . . tell me all about the ring."

The man composed himself with an effort. "I . . . Barbara and I understood each other that night, Vera. We didn't say anything about it. I just gave her the ring."

"I know. Barbara came and showed it to me. I didn't know that you had given it to her. Then you think that the police——"

Basil Gault rose and faced Vera. "The police think nothing. Dawson, knowing that I knew something about Egypt, asked me to go to the Yard and tell him what I thought of the ring. I said nothing. They don't even know that the ring has anything to do with Barbara. I don't know if I'll tell them anything or not. I've been walking about for hours, and I've come to the decision that for the present at any rate I'm going to fight my own battle, mine and Barbara's, without any assistance from the police. I expect it's thoroughly illegal, but I don't care. Help me, Vera, will you ? "

" But how ? "

" By saying nothing if the police come to you."

" Why should the police come to me about some ring picked up in Limehouse ? "

Basil shrugged. " There's no knowing where all this will lead to. I came to you thinking that perhaps Barbara would have shown you the ring and that when the description is published you would speak. I don't want you to."

Vera busied herself with the cafeta. The canary that had been Barbara's chirped from its little gilded cage.

" Do you think it is wise ? "

" I don't know."

" I mean, won't it prevent the authorities from tracing Barbara ? Perhaps, Basil, you do not want her traced."

" Why should I not want Barbara traced ? "

" Oh, I was only wondering. I thought you might . . . oh, I don't know what I think. What are you going to do ? "

Basil took the cup Vera handed to him. He stirred the coffee meditatively. " I'm going where I feel Barbara to be. I am going back to Egypt. By the way, Vera, you didn't see very much of Hassan, did you ? "

"Only coming and going about the studios. I met him quite a bit. Why?"

"But you know nothing about him?"

"Not more than we all know. I've heard tales. We all have. Why are you asking me all this?"

Basil still stirred his coffee. The fragrance awakened memories. He was back again in the studio but a few short weeks since. Over there by the window Ali had stood over the spirit lamp on the ebony table, Hassan beside him, watching the brewing of the berry. Barbara, her cheeks flushed with the happiness that had come to her, nestling among the yellow cushions on the divan. Vera at the piano playing . . . what was it that she had played that night? Something of Greig's . . . something plaintive. . . .

"I've learnt quite a lot about friend Hassan since I left England," he said at last. "Quite a lot. I couldn't find Traverson, the friend of my father's in Cairo, but I saw his assistant. Traverson was away back in the Sudan, dealing with some sheik who had got a bit above himself. But I learnt that he knew Hassan. Wanted to know him better, I gathered. . . . By the way, Vera, did you ever read any account of the lucky find I made in the bazaar in Cairo?"

"They were speaking about it at the ball that night. Some treasure stone, wasn't it?"

Basil nodded. "Yes. I had dodged the dragoman who wanted to take me to the Tentmaker's Bazaar, but I slipped off by myself down the Musky. At the corner of the Khordagiya—but you don't know Cairo, do you, Vera?—I turned to the right, and was soon among the little shops and stalls of the Levantines.

All showy jewellery, flimsy barbaric stuff, charms and what not. And there among a rubble of bracelets, faked ornaments from tombs and other worthless stuff, I found one of the two things which Egyptologists have been searching for for a couple of thousand years and more."

Basil paused and lit another cigarette. Vera was leaning forward, her lips parted.

"The Stones of Khor date from the capture of Memphis by the Ethiopians in the year 730 B.C. They are said to contain the key to the burial of the treasure of the Temple of Memphis which was hastily collected by the priest-kings and carried out of the city as the Ethiopians entered it. It is said that the priests drew lots, and two of them were chosen as guardians. One was sent north and the other south, each with no knowledge of the other's movements. The Stones would, in their gods' good time come together, they said. The remaining priests to ensure their silence drowned themselves in the Nile. Thrilling, isn't it, Vera ? "

" And it was one of these stones you found ? "

" Just that. Like many things diligently searched for, it has been lying no doubt under our noses for many a day. The old Levantine in the Khordagiya had grown so rich doling out rubbish from Birmingham to the tourists, that he had grown careless, and didn't know the real thing when he got it. He haggled as they all do, but I bought the thing for practically nothing. Believe me, Vera, I'd be the happiest, the proudest man alive if this trouble hadn't come upon me. I believe . . . I almost forget about Barbara in talking about it."

" You'll find Barbara, Basil."

" God willing. But to think of having her here. She'd be one of the heroines of the hour. I'd be addressing learned societies; there would be a craze for Egyptian things, Khor embroideries and Memphis gowns. . . . Oh, what's the use ? "

Basil drained his cup and set it down upon the table. " My journalistic duties took me south the next day, and it was a week before I returned to Cairo. I found a telegram waiting for me at Shepheard's from my father. He had read my cable to the *Record*, and had wired me to return at once with the Stone. From what he could gather he had bought the counterpart to it at a sale in Wales. I arranged to leave for Alexandria the next morning, and then the telegram came telling me of my father's death."

" The Stones coming together . . . after all those centuries. And with death. . . . It's terrible, Basil, . . . wonderful. . . ."

" That night, Vera, I dined at a café in the Garden of the Ezbakiyeh. I couldn't face the crowd at Shepheard's. I left the gardens about nine and walked back along the Sharia Kemal. It's a populous thoroughfare and I ought to have been safe, but in the darkness I was accosted by two men who asked me the way to somewhere, and I came to to find a native policeman bending over me and a gaping crowd. I had not been robbed and I made some excuse to the policeman, gave my name, and got through the crowd to the hotel. There I found that my room had been entered and my luggage cut open and ransacked. But I was too many for them. Look."

Basil took from his breast pocket a roll of tissue paper, and opening it displayed to the girl's eyes a flat stone of grey-green. For a moment the eyes were held, then Vera shrank back with a little cry.

"You . . . you bought that in Cairo?"

"Yes. . . . What's the matter, Vera?"

"But I've seen it before. Barbara was wearing it at the Albert Hall that night. She went as an Egyptian lady. . . . Clarkson made the dress . . . all white with gold. . . ."

"You say Barbara wore this? But I've carried it about with me ever since I left Cairo. I . . . Then it must mean that . . ."

"That your father was right when he wired to you. That he must have lent it to Barbara to go with her dress. . . . I remember now. She did say something about the old Professor being a dear. . . . I was helping her to dress. Think, Basil, think hard. What are we going to do?"

Basil Gault rose from his chair and took a turn up and down the studio. "Things are clearing a little," he said. "When I reached London I did what little there was to do at Storm House, reported myself to the police, and ran up to Oxford to see Professor Carton. Carton has the best library of Egyptian lore in England except the British Museum. In one of the volumes I found a good deal about the Memphis treasure and the key to its hiding-place. One of the Stones, I read, had been traced to the possession of the descendants of a tribal chief notorious in the past as a tomb robber, but it had been lost or stolen during the early part of the nineteenth century. The name of that family was Hassan."

" Our Hassan ? "

Basil shrugged his shoulders. " It's a common enough name and it did not have any significance for me as I read. Now, after what I've learnt here, I'm wondering. I remember Hassan one night when we were up at Magdalen, talking what I took to be a lot of rot about some wonderful treasure that had been in the keeping of his family for years, and for which he was still searching. He is rich enough anyway, but this was something vast, the treasure of emperors. He had been drinking and, as I say, I didn't take much stock of what he said."

" Then you think . . . ? "

" I don't know what to think. It's all too wonderful. I can see Robert Hassan, if what I think is true, reading of my find in Cairo, and I suppose the sale where my father bought his Stone was reported in the papers. Sir Elmer Roacher was pretty well known. You see where all this is leading ? "

" Yes . . . yes . . . I see. Go on."

" You say Barbara wore this ornament at the ball. Was Hassan there ? "

" He was going but he did not turn up. Why ? "

" Because it looks uncommonly as if Robert Hassan was absent from the Albert Hall that night because he had business elsewhere . . . business at Storm House."

Basil took up his hat and coat from the chair upon which he had laid them on entering.

" Good-night, Vera. I'm going to think . . . as you said . . . think hard. I'll come in and see you in the morning. May I ? "

"Of course, Basil. I'm going to think, too. Good-night, Basil."

For fully an hour after Basil had left, Vera Peacock remained curled up among the yellow cushions. She was thinking furiously. Also she was to a certain extent annoyed. From being the centre of this most intriguing affair it looked as though she were about to be relegated to the background. Barbara and Hassan in Egypt. Basil going to Egypt. Vera remaining in Chelsea. . . . The hunt, as it were, was passing her by.

"Panton."

The maid, who had been waiting in the inner room for the time to come when she might retire, entered the room, deftly concealing a yawn behind her hand.

"Madame called. . . ."

"Yes, Panton. Madame called. Madame is going to Egypt. No, stupid, don't look at the clock. I'm not going to-night. I want you to look out what I had better take. Badæker will tell you what's what. Good-night, Panton. Don't wait up for me."

"Thank you, madame. Good-night, madame."

Vera Peacock rose from the divan and crossed the studio to where a sectional bookcase occupied a space between the fire-place and the big window. She fell upon her knees and ran her eyes over the titles lettered upon the backs of the books. Selecting a few of these the girl returned to her nest among the cushions. She turned up the lamp and set ready to her hand the silver box of Nestors.

Panton, drawing the curtains the next morning, raised her eyebrows and wondered what time it could have been when her mistress had gone to bed. She looked at the table beside the couch. Upon it were a "Guide to the Upper Nile," "Cairo of To-day," Sax Rohmer's "Green Eyes of Bast," seven cigarette ends and a pass-book.

Panton raised her eyebrows again and thought that eleven o'clock would be quite early enough to take her mistress her cup of tea.

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

IF one leaves the train from Cairo at the dusty little station of Fassiut and makes his way through the straggling village, he will come out upon the old caravan road leading westwards and southwards into the desolation of the far-distant Sudan. Should he pursue this desert track—and there are indeed few who show the inclination to do so—he will after many hours' riding, pass within a very few miles of the Oasis of El Bahar. But he will know nothing of this for the oasis lies in a tiny declivity and is but a handful of clay-built houses fringed by cotton-fields and date-groves, hidden away in the vast wastes of sand as a raft, derelict in the trough of a wave, lies hidden upon the ocean. That is, if we except the residence of the lord and master of El Bahar.

The few travellers who to-day take the caravan road have business with the people of Kasr Dakhla, and have no interest in El Bahar. They would know nothing of the place were it not for some dragoman who, pointing to a tenuous track winding across the sand to the south to be lost in the haze of the Lybian Desert, would tell them that over there some five miles away lay the home of the Hassans, and, if he could but find listeners, would beguile the tedium of the journey to Dakhla with more or less true stories of the family, their remote origin, their wealth, their life in Cairo and London. But, as I have said, travellers leaving Fassiut to buy dates from the people of Kasr Dakhla have interest in little else than to get their wearisome journey done with with as little delay as may be.

Even by its hereditary lord El Bahar had been but seldom visited since the rise to affluence of Robert Hassan's father and the luring of his Parisian wife to his desert home. But as the date-palms and the cotton-fields brought certain grist to the Hassan mills, and as the unbridled liberty and servile loyalty of the East constituted a welcome change from the ordered existence of St. James' Street, Robert Hassan, since his taking over his property, had made almost yearly visits to his kingdom—a domain where any law save the law of the Hassan was unknown, and where infringement of that law brought swift retribution to the delinquent.

Barbara Manton, a few days after her host had brought her to El Bahar, stood by one of the wooden lattices of an upper room in Robert Hassan's house looking down upon the sun-drenched square of the village—a village that might have been lifted bodily from some old picture of Biblical days, and which seemed not to have changed since the birth of time. Always, to Barbara, the desert had suggested romance and colour, but there was little of either about the cluster of two or three dozen clay hovels that made up the centre of El Bahar. Drably-clothed Arabs squatted in the purple shadows, and in and out of the alley-ways dogs came and went like grim hosts in some canine underworld.

Somnolent, utterly wearying were the sons of the desert who, having been decreed by the prophet to accept El Bahar as their abiding-place, were either too fatalistic or too indolent to change. A meagre living wrested from the sandy soil, a few starving chickens, the weekly market at Fassiut, toll to the Hassan and praises to Allah, and they would seem to be content as were their brethren sleeping in the little Arab cemetery beyond the village on the very fringe of the desert.

Beyond the outer walls of El Bahar the fields, green near at hand but greying into the distance, were dull and monotonous to the eye as were the further stretches of rifted sand and the low-lying barrier of the Lybian Hills showing desolate and sombre against the sky. Truly a most effective prison.

For Barbara had known for some time now that " prisoner " were a more fitting word than " guest " in which to describe her position. Robert Hassan had, since his first and only lapse aboard the *Seamew*, been discretion itself, but Barbara had not failed to note the subtle change that took place in the man as they left civilisation, as she knew it, behind them and penetrated further and further into the mystic land of Egypt. Bitterly Barbara had repented her determination to accompany him; bitterly had she reproached herself for her cowardice in not facing her situation, confident in her moral innocence. But the net had become too subtly, too tightly drawn, and the willing guest had become, even before she was aware of it, the fettered captive. Well she knew that the cloak which had so well served Robert Hassan's evil purpose would be thrown aside at his will; knew, too, that the sun of his native land would soon pierce and melt the thin veneer of civilisation and disclose the naked savagery of the man beneath.

Twice during the journey had she attempted escape, and twice had her plans been frustrated. Nothing had been said, but always there had been someone or something at hand to show her the fallacy of taking any road but the one that Robert Hassan intended she should take. And so step by step she had been drawn onwards, chances of escape growing less and ever less, until the arrival at El Bahar had sealed all avenues and had bred in the heart of Barbara Manton the hopelessness of utter despair. For the first time fear had gripped her. The desert, the Garden of Allah about which Basil had talked to her and about which she had woven so often a garment of romance, became to her a terrible thing, a mighty enemy. . . .

True, she was not confined to the house. As yet the chains that bound her were but of silk. The whole oasis was hers to walk in as she wished. Hassan had been at pains to tell her this the night of their arrival, and it had been too dark or she had been too tired to notice the smile which had accompanied the man's words. And in the morning when Barbara had looked from her window she had asked herself whether any bolts or bars ever forged could be as encircling as countless miles of untracked, waterless desert.

She left her room now and passed down the shallow steps to the red and black tiled courtyard where, in its marble basin, the slender jet of a fountain gave a grateful coolness to the air. A Nubian servant seated in the shadow of the arched doorway raised his head as she passed out into the vivid sunlight of the square. No one followed her, but Barbara was aware of eyes at windows, of stealthily-raised turbans, and she knew that wherever Robert Hassan might be he would not long be left in ignorance of the movements of the visitor within his gates.

If any doubts had existed in the girl's mind they would have been dispelled as she left the open square of the village and made her way through narrow, tortuous streets towards the fields that fringed the desert. Light footsteps behind caused her to turn, to see a heavily-robed figure in whom Barbara recognised the Arab woman whom Robert Hassan had appointed to be her personal attendant hurrying through the alley-way keeping well under the shadows of the overhanging houses.

" You want me, Jebel ? "

The woman stood meekly before her mistress, where she was awaiting her. " If madame will permit me to walk with her . . ."

The voice was low and even-toned, the French without a trace of accent other than a certain softness of the East.

" I have no choice it seems . . ." And then, seeing the pain in the eyes of the woman, Barbara linked her hand in her arm. " Why, certainly, Jebel, you may walk with me. I thought at first that . . ."

" But what, madame, did you think ? "

Barbara shrugged her shoulders. Then, with an intuition that this woman was to be trusted : " That you, too, were a spy like the others."

The woman did not at once answer. In silence the two women made their way past the scattered outlying hovels that lay beyond the alley and out on to the edge of the desert. And then Jebel spoke.

" You do not like my master ? "

Barbara looked keenly at Jebel. If this were a trap to trick her into some admission to be carried hot-foot to Robert Hassan, it should fail. And yet, as she looked into the care-lined face, her woman's heart told her that here, also, was a woman in trouble; here, also, a soul fettered as was her own.

" Why do you ask me that ? "

" Because, madame, I want a partner in my hate. . . . Oh, madame, hear me ! Cannot we help each other ? See, I am trusting you. Robert Hassan—may Allah give his flesh to dogs !—is a devil. You do not know your danger. You are beautiful . . . beautiful as the moon on the desert . . . beautiful as my daughter was . . ."

" Your daughter, Jebel ? "

" Yes, madame." The eyes in the dark face shone. " May I tell you, madame, about my daughter ? I followed you, madame, to tell you this story."

" Of course."

For a few moments Jebel was silent. She stood there, looking out over the sand towards the north. Then :

" It was when Hassan was in El Bahar two years ago . . ."

And there, upon the fringe of the age-old desert, Barbara Manton listened to a story age-old as the sands themselves. Jebel's daughter had been sixteen when Robert Hassan had come up on one of his business visits to El Bahar. Sixteen, Jebel said, and as lovely as a Lybian night. It was while Hassan had been riding upon a tour of inspection through the groves with his overseer, Maspar, that he had seen Zelie at work. . . . Zelie had worked no more after that. Her father, who had dared to defend his child's honour, had been found the next day out there in the desert, twenty knife-wounds in his body.

"And your daughter . . . she is dead?"

The woman raised her eyes to the skies. The mute, dog-like appeal to Allah. Zelie, she said, had gone from El Bahar. No one knew whither. She had asked Robert Hassan, but he had only laughed in her face and given her money. And a week after that he had gone back to London. A dragoman who had come in from Cairo spoke once of seeing the girl in a dancing-hall in the Bulak. But what could a woman do? It was many hundred miles to Cairo. Perhaps madame could help her?

"In what way, Jebel? Am I not a prisoner as you are?"

"But you English have power. I lived long in Cairo, where I was maid to Robert Hassan's French mother. There were consuls in Cairo."

Barbara laughed bitterly. "There are no consuls in El Bahar. . . . My future is in the hands of my God as yours in the hands of Allah. The distance to Cairo is as great a barrier to me as to you."

"But one may see the future if one wishes. One can act on that."

Again Barbara laughed. She had heard and read all about these charlatans of the East, with their tricks and their writings in the sand; Basil and she had laughed often over the tales he had to tell of them.

Jebel went on: " If madame would lend me her pen . . . the future or perhaps the past . . ."

Barbara hesitated a moment, then unfastened the clip that held her fountain-pen in position, and handed the stylo to the waiting woman. She watched while Jebel unscrewed the cap and shook into the palm of her hand a few drops of ink, afterwards drawing a rough design resembling a pentagon around it. Seating herself upon the broken coping of a low wall, the woman gazed steadily at the tiny globule that shone under the sun like some wonderful black pearl of the Indies against the brown of Jebel's skin.

Barbara, leaning against the bole of a sycamore that gave dappled shade, watched her attendant with an indulgent smile. A lizard stretched out lazily a-top the wall regarded her with watchful, wise little eyes. No sound save the barking of dogs somewhere in the village and the low murmur of the incantations of the woman, who sat motionless, gazing into the pool of ink.

" Do you see anything, Jebel? "

The woman answered without raising her eyes. " It is all so strange. I see a room. A curious room . . . perhaps one of the rooms in the Cairo Museum. There are mummies there in cases . . . in rows. A man is lying upon the floor. Sleeping, perhaps. I cannot see his face. There is no light, but the moon . . ."

Barbara stood for a moment as though turned to stone. Then, running forward, fell upon her knees, gazing with fascinated eyes into the tiny black pool in Jebel's hand. The smile of tolerance was gone from her lips, and she was deadly pale.

"Yes . . . yes . . ."

"Two men are bending over him. One is in the shadow. I cannot see him very well. The other wears a turban, a green turban like those worn by the descendants of the prophet . . . and now a light has come and all is clear. The men hurry away into the shadows. I cannot see where they go. And then . . ."

Barbara laid a trembling hand on Jebel's arm. Her eyes, wide with wonder, looked deep into those of the other woman.

"Yes. And then a woman comes. Say a woman comes, Jebel."

And, fearful of saying too much, of breaking the spell, Barbara paused, biting at her lips.

Jebel leant closer over her hand. "A woman comes . . . yes, a woman, but I cannot see her face. She walks away from me and I can only see her back. But it is not you, madame," with a shrewd look at the pale face of the woman on her knees by her side. "It is a woman of Egypt with a robe of white. She wears sandals. She bends over the fallen man . . ."

Barbara lifted her head as Jebel broke off. The woman's face, livid with fear, was raised to where the sycamore grew by the wall. In her eyes was the look of a bird fascinated by a serpent. And, following her gaze, Barbara saw, standing regarding them with an amused smile curving the cruel mouth, Robert Hassan.

With his return to his own people Hassan had in part adopted the native dress, and he presented a curiously barbaric figure as he stood, the sunlight through the foliage of the sycamore spangling him with little discs of radiance. His white silk shirt was open at the neck, showing the olive of his neck and chest. A sash of orange Kashmere encircled his slender waist for, like all men of Egyptian birth, Robert Hassan had the slimness of a girl. A long thin *gibbeh* of brown cloth fell almost to the red morocco slippers that encased the narrow feet. He threw the cigarette he had been smoking from him and laughed.

"I thought, Barbara, that you would have had no truck with nonsense of this sort. You can buy it anywhere in Bond Street at a guinea a time."

He turned upon Jebel, who had risen and was standing servilely a few paces away, and shot out a few words of Arabic. Barbara could not understand them, but their import was clear by the threatening gesture with which Hassan waved the woman aside. She had an uneasy feeling that had she not been present the man would have struck his slave to the ground. She watched the woman bow and creep away until her bent figure was lost in one of the alley-ways. Then she turned to Robert Hassan.

"You, then, with your Eastern blood, do not believe in . . . ?"

The man regarded her for a moment without speaking. He took no trouble to cloak the fire that had come into his eyes.

"I believe in life, Barbara, and all the things that life has to offer. Power . . . love. It is not good to be out here in the sun, Barbara, at this hour. Complexions wither . . . roses fade. If you will allow me I will escort you back to the house."

He advanced towards her, his hand outstretched to take her arm, but Barbara drew back. For a fleeting moment their eyes met, and in that moment they each of them knew that the foils were off the rapiers, that subterfuge was no longer useful to either of them.

"You will not dare to touch me, Robert Hassan."

He gave the shrug that she knew so well and which she had learnt to dread. "I but asked, Barbara, to be allowed to escort you. It would not be the first time that Robert Hassan had escorted Barbara Manton."

"In London . . . everything was so different."

"Very different. . . . In the West we ask for what in the East we take. What was it that that hag was showing you as I came up?"

"If you do not believe in such things, why do you ask?"

The man's face grew darkly red. "Because I have a right to know what my servants do. I did not place Jebel in the position she holds with you so that she might fill your pretty head with nonsense."

"Jebel has told me many things, Robert Hassan. Some of them were not new to me. It has not needed magic to tell me why you have placed Jebel in the position she holds."

He looked at her narrowly. Watching him, Barbara saw that the knuckles of the brown hands showed almost white. Clearly, Robert Hassan was finding it hard to keep himself in check. And as she turned from him to make her way back through the gap in the crumbling wall, he took two long steps towards her and caught her in his arms, arms that were like whipcord tied tightly around her body.

Raising her little hand, she struck at the laughing lips that were so close to hers that she could feel the man's hot breath upon her. "Let me go . . . oh, you cur! . . ."

"Not until you have answered me. You will learn, perhaps, in time, that here in El Bahar all men—yes, and all women—obey the word of Robert Hassan. A change from St. James' Street, eh, and the Savoyard, where one must fetch and carry like a servant to win a smile from a lady!" He had partly released her, but his fingers still held her slender wrists in the grip of a vice. "You will tell me?"

"Yes, I will tell you, Robert Hassan, when you let go my hands."

The man's fingers slid from her wrists to the tips of hers. He raised the little hands to his lips . . . burning them with his kisses.

Barbara sank down upon the loose stones of the wall. For a little while she could not speak. Then: "Jebel told me nothing that I did not already suspect. She did not know what it was she was saying. I tell you this so that you shall not punish her. She was speaking of the witchcraft and charms of Egypt, and I asked her to show me the ink prophecy."

"And you learnt what . . . what?"

"I learnt, Robert Hassan, something that has made me so happy that I do not care what becomes of me. I know what I think I have known all along. I know that I am innocent of Ambrose Gault's death. And with my mind at rest on that I do not care what becomes of me."

A short laugh from Robert Hassan. "And that being so, may I ask what sent you in such distress to St. James' Street upon the night of the murder?"

Barbara rose slowly from her seat upon the wall. It was clear to her that the man was anxious to ascertain the extent of her knowledge.

"I would rather not discuss it. Did you not say it was bad to be out here in the sun at this hour?"

She turned from him without another word, and faced the alley-way by which Jebel and she had left the village. And every moment she expected to again feel those arms of steel about her . . . the man's kisses seemed still to sting her hands. But Barbara was allowed to depart without further molestation. No need for Robert Hassan to play his game in any way but the way of his own choosing. Time, everything was his. He stood there in the shade of the sycamore watching the boyish figure of Barbara Manton as it came and went in and out of the patches of shadow and sunlight.

Barbara entered the courtyard, and again the Nubian raised and lowered his head as she passed him. Reaching her room, she walked to the low wooden lattice and looked out into the desolation. How long she stayed there, her chin cupped in her hand, she did not know, but she was brought from her dreaming by Jebel's voice at her elbow. The woman had been weeping.

"What is it, Jebel? I am so sorry. He has hurt you?"

" Waste not your sorrow upon me, madame. A few bruises, what are they ? I am old, madame, and Robert Hassan cannot hurt me more than he has done. It is the young and beautiful, madame, who need your pity. You will dress now, madame ? "

Barbara laughed shortly. " Why should I dress, Jebel ? "

The woman turned aside her head. Her voice was low as she answered : " My master has returned. It is his wish that madame should dine with him to-night."

Silence, save for the tinkle of a water-carrier's brass pots as he passed the window on his way to the well.

" Why won't you look at me, Jebel ? "

The woman turned her head again, and for a moment her eyes looked into those of her mistress.

Barbara laughed. " Yes, Jebel, I will dine with Robert Hassan. You will put out the dress they bought for me in Alexandria. Yes, the white one. A woman must look her best when honoured with an invitation from Robert Hassan."

She turned from the window into the darkened room. From across the desert, as though from a million miles away, there sighed a wind . . . a hot, airless wind without freshness . . . without hope.

The representative whom Hassan had sent ashore into Alexandria to attend to the very necessary shopping for his guest had done his work well. The small amount of money which Barbara had had in her purse when she had left the Albert Hall and which she had insisted upon Hassan accepting, could not have paid for one-tenth of the things which Jebel spread out in the sleeping-chamber for her mistress's inspection.

The knowledge that some day the man would be paid back in full for all his disbursements on her behalf only partly consoled the girl for the indignity of wearing what Hassan, now that she knew the man for what he was, had chosen for her. Her flesh shrank from the embrace of the silk, the delicate scent that rose from the fabrics nauseated her. And yet, was it not all part of the game that she had set herself to play? Barbara was too much woman not to know the value of dainty armour when the opponent was mere man. Tilting her chin she looked with complacent satisfaction upon the picture framed in the old Cairene mirror which Jebel held before her.

The gown of shimmering white fitted her little figure to perfection, and toned exquisitely with the gold-brown hair in which was thrust a Spanish comb of pale amber fringed with silver. Jebel had placed upon her shoulders a curiously barbaric shawl of Kashmere, chrome yellow with a vague, elusive design in a slightly heavier tone, almost orange. The shoes, tapering and fitting to perfection, were the work of a Paris maker who had a branch establishment in the fashionable quarter of Alexandria.

Against the lattice-work of the windows, with the deepening blue of the evening sky seen beyond, Barbara Manton made a wonderfully effective and arresting picture. And, woman-like, the spirits of the girl rose with the satisfied knowledge of the perfectly gowned. The stage was set. The players standing at the wings awaiting their call. The curtain was about to rise.

. . . A momentary fear caught at Barbara's heart as she thought upon what tragedy it might not fall.

She gathered the shawl about her figure and passed from the room and down the stairs. The Nubian, who seemed not to have moved since she had left the house that afternoon, again raised his head, and this time he paused awhile, open admiration in the half-closed eyes, before he lowered them. Pictures such as this were rare in El Bahar.

Robert Hassan was awaiting his guest in a small, heavily-curtained room that was a curious mixture of East and West. Prayer-rugs littered the floor, and the furniture was a compromise between Egypt and the Tottenham Court Road. Hanging-lamps cast a dull ruby glow over a table that had been set for two, shining upon gleaming glass and china and upon snowy napery.

Hassan himself was in evening dress, as she had so often seen him in London; but now he had made concessions, and decorative concessions at that, to the climate and as a mark of respect to his native country. A sash of crimson encircled his narrow waist, and the soft shirt was of silk, and loosely tied at the neck with a tasselled cord. A fez of deep red lay on the divan, from the cushions of which the man rose as Barbara entered the room. The air was heavy with the fragrance of the cigarette he was smoking.

He bowed and motioned the girl to a seat. "You will see, Barbara, that I bring a little London with me to El Bahar, just as I always take a little El Bahar away with me to London. The curtains in my flat in St. James' Street you will remember . . ."

Barbara interrupted him with the suspicion of a smile. It was clearly expected of her that the incident of the afternoon should be forgotten.

"You forget, Mr. Hassan, that I have never seen your flat in St. James' Street."

Hassan laughed. He threw the end of his cigarette out through the open window. "Of course you would not remember! You remember so little of that night when you came to me. But we will leave it at that. It would be a shame to spoil what promises to be so pleasant an evening by any discussion."

"Yes, we will leave it at that, Mr. Hassan."

Barbara rose and walked across the room to where, through the half-parted curtains, was a glimpse of the courtyard. She held apart the folds and passed out on to a balcony from which, across the rough top of the plastered wall, the desert spread out to a horizon that met and became one with the rose and amber after-glow left by the newly-set sun. An amber that merged into green, and green that merged into blue—a blue that grew deeper and more black as it arched overhead. Little desert sounds came to her: the distant rattle of brazen vessels of people gathered about the well, the moaning of camels . . .

"You think it beautiful, Barbara?"

Hassan's voice was close to her. She could almost feel the hot breath upon her neck as the man bent towards her. She shivered slightly; then, remembering the part she had set herself to play, recovered her control. In the fast-gathering dusk the man showed dimly beside her, the ruby glow from within the room playing strange tricks of light and shadow upon his features. For a moment they stood looking out over the desert.

"Come, Barbara, we will go in. Ali has served us, I think."

He held out an arm to her and, with but a momentary hesitation, the girl took it, and together they passed into the room. The sounds of the water-carriers and the camels died away as Ali closed to the curtains behind them with a soft rustle of silk.

Barbara, in after days, could never tell what it was that was served to her that night. It was a banquet such as one knows in dreams. She remembers that soft-footed, white-clad servants placed many dishes before her and that she tasted some of them. Sweetmeats there were, and syrupy liqueurs and coffee that sent her mind back to Vera Peacock's studio . . . and Basil.

Hassan spoke continuously, and she supposed that she answered him. Small talk for the most part: interesting things about the desert, little side-issues of life in London, the wonders that he proposed to show her during her stay, journeys to the neighbouring ruins and temples. It was as though they were two tourists planning out the itinerary of their trip. Hassan said not a word as to what had brought them to El Bahar, and yet, behind it all, Barbara felt the beating of the wings of doom.

"Ali has not lost the art of coffee-making. You remember the night after the Savoyard? Ugh, your English fogs. Do you not prefer the desert, Barbara?"

"I have not yet seen very much of it. It is very beautiful . . . and very terrible. . . ."

Robert Hassan rose and held apart the curtains. "You think so, Barbara? Come here, just here to the edge of the balcony. You shall see my desert at its best. The stars are out. . . . Come. . . ."

The girl took up the shawl and threw it about her shoulders and passed out between the curtains that Hassan held aside for her. Ali, entering the room with fresh coffee, smiled a little to himself. He looked curiously towards the curtains. From beyond them there came the sound of voices. The servant trimmed the lamps, removed the soiled dishes . . . arranged the rugs and the cushions upon the big divan . . . paused, head raised in the act of listening. . . .

She was ?. by whom

Suddenly the curtains were torn apart with a harsh rattle of rings upon the brass rod. Barbara, flushed to the roots of her disordered hair, stumbled into the room. Ali, moving towards her, was motioned aside, and there was that in the gleaming blue of Barbara Manton's eyes that gave even the stolid Ali pause. When she had run through the archway leading into the inner court, the man turned to face his master. He threw out his hands in an expressive gesture.

"Impetuous as usual. . . ."

Robert Hassan poured himself out coffee. "Impetuous be damned! And you, too, with your eternal croaking. We are in El Bahar, not in St. James' Street. We Hassans have red blood in our veins, and it grows cold and stagnant in London. . . . Starlight on the desert and the brown-gold hair of a woman. . . . It eats into the soul. . . ." He stopped suddenly as from the outer gate there came a knocking. "What's that, Ali?"

" That will be Maspar, sir. One is apt to forget, when one gives oneself to love-making, that there are other matters to be dealt with."

And, bowing low, Ali walked from the room and across the courtyard. Hassan listened to the pad-pad of his feet, heard him fumbling with the great wooden *dabbeh* of the outer gate.

And at the window above the room in which Robert Hassan awaited the coming of his visitor, a girl leant her head on the lattice-work and sobbed softly. In the dimly-lighted room behind her Jebel moved hither and thither noiselessly, the lamp throwing grotesque shadows of her upon the ceiling. From time to time the woman would cast a glance towards her mistress, and the lined face would harden, and the softness of the big black eyes turn to hatred of the man who was a law unto himself, who . . .

Jebel drew back into the shadows as the slim form by the window moved. Watching, she saw the pale, tear-drenched face raised to the eternal stars . . . heard the sobbing whisper . . . " Basil . . . oh, Basil, my dear . . . ! "

CHAPTER II

"THE night air, madame. It is a little treacherous after heated rooms for those not born to it."

Barbara turned her head as Jebel came forward with a cloak which she threw about her mistress's shoulders. She gave a little half-laugh.

"Yes, Jebel. Treacherous. . . . And how beautiful, Jebel! Look, Jebel, where the stars seem to dip into the sand over there where the palm-trees are black. No, don't close the window. I will be all right here with this cloak."

The girl drew the folds closer about her throat. A woollen cloak of native manufacture, the roughness of the material rubbed harshly against her skin, and from it there rose an indefinable odour, a smell at once unpleasant and fascinating. The scent of Egypt . . . of dead ages. . . .

The odour of dead ages. . . .

Barbara turned back into the room. She sank upon the divan, her eyes staring unseeing into the spaces of the room. Once before had that peculiar smell assailed her nostrils. And just as upon that former time it had, as it were, stolen away her senses, now it would seem to be having the opposite effect upon her. As the mists rise from the valleys at the coming of the sun, so now the mists were clearing from the mind of Barbara Manton.

The room faded. In her mind's eye the girl again saw the museum at Storm House—not vaguely, as it had come to her in the fitful flashes that had been all the memory she had lately had, but clear-cut as a cameo upon the tablet of her mind. The little blur of radiance that was the Professor's study, the moonlight, dim and diffused, making the very darkness of the place visible. She could see the half-finished cup of cocoa upon the desk, the horn-rimmed spectacles lying as the Professor had dropped them upon the folded copy of the *Record.* Again the horror of that night took her. She was clad again in the white, flowing robes of Old Egypt . . . fumbling upon the lintel of a door for the switch . . . flooding the big room with light.

She shut her eyes as she called to her mind the picture of the Professor lying huddled beside the case of antiquities. It was all so cruelly clear. She had knelt by him, had called him by name, had raised his head to see the death that was in his eyes. Then darkness had come again, and the sound of stealthy movements about her . . . the folds of stifling cloth about her head and mouth and in her nostrils . . . *the odour of dead ages. . . .*

So, she remembered, once before had a scent brought pictures to her. It had been a night when Basil had driven her out to Richmond and their punt had lain for a while beneath an overhanging bank in a breakwater where hawthorn grew and showered its petals into the water. Almost, that night, had he declared his love, and always, afterwards, the scent of hawthorn had brought before her the river-bank, the distant murmur of a weir, the muted strains of a gramophone upon one of the house-boats moored out on the river . . . and Basil.

And now, in like manner, an odour—as of ancient evil—had brought her out of the morass of mystery in which she had been groping, out into the light of understanding. And with the light there had come over her a wonderful peace. Any lingering doubts that she might, in all innocence, have been a factor in the death of Basil's father were gone. All the suspicions that she had had of Robert Hassan and the part he had played in this thing returned to her, became certainties.

She thought of the scene that night below upon the balcony and her cheeks flamed anew at the shame of it. His kisses seemed to sear into her neck as though there were left there a blemish that nothing in all the world would ever remove. And yet, desperate as was her position, alone here beyond the reach of civilisation, it would but make matters worse were she to make use of her new-found knowledge and accuse the man of murder. Dogs such as Robert Hassan should be allowed to lie sleeping as long as they will.

Now that the principle grief in her life was removed, she could view the past from a new and altogether different angle. What if she were to accuse him? Men of the calibre of Robert Hassan are cowards at heart. Cunning is theirs, and guile, but seldom courage. And then Barbara told herself that conviction was far from being proof, and that she must wait.

That it had been Hassan or Hassan's emissaries who had attacked her in Storm House there could be no manner of doubt in her own mind. If, indeed, she had been at Hassan's flat in St. James' Street that night, the visit had been none of her seeking. Hassan's lies crowded back upon her in the full force of their sinister significance.

And yet there was much that still was dark. Much that called for explanation. She could not remember that Basil's father had been even known to Robert Hassan. The two younger men, too, had been acquaintances rather than friends. What, then, could have brought the man to Hampstead upon the night when all his world was making merry at the Albert Hall ?

A great desire came to the girl to again, that night, face the man who had so grossly insulted her but an hour or so ago. Face to face with Robert Hassan, she would know how to act ; the path that seemed to her now so dark would be made clear. Already it was open war between them, but Hassan would not yet imagine any reason for her hostility except the girl's resentment that he should have made love to her. And to a man such as Robert Hassan that would count for little or, at most, but as an obstacle that a few hours' reflection would remove.

She rose from the divan and crossed to the door that communicated with the small chamber in which Jebel slept. But the waiting woman was not there. Barbara walked to the head of the stairs and peered down over the low rail into the well of the courtyard, all black and silver mosaic in the pale light of the stars. The Nubian was no longer at his post, and the fountain in the centre of the paved square was silent.

Barbara drew the folds of her dark cloak over her head and walked down the stairs. How still it all was out here, how cool and restful under the dark canopy of heaven spangled with the great African stars! Her little slippers making no sound upon the tiles, she made her way towards the curtain that covered the archway leading into the room in which she had that night dined with Robert Hassan. And as she drew near she saw that the curtains were slightly parted, and that beyond them still glowed that hateful ruby light.

For a moment the girl hesitated, and as she stood motionless there came to her the sound of a voice. A soft, low-toned voice, but very clear. The man who was speaking was beyond her limited range of vision, but it was not Robert Hassan, nor was it Ali. Some stranger was closeted with the master of El Bahar, some man with a softly-insinuating voice and who spoke French without any appreciable accent.

Noiselessly she drew nearer to the half-parted curtains, but even then she could see neither of the occupants of the room. But the clear, even tones of the speaker reached her, and the girl slipped into the deep shadow of a recess and stood scarcely breathing . . . her ears strained to the uttermost.

" . . . Can only tell you, chief, as it was told to me by Mahmoud. Upon the terrace at Shepheard's. Mahmoud could not get near enough to hear what was said, but in conversation with a dragoman he learnt that Monsieur Gault takes the road within a week."

" And the road leads to where, Maspar ? "

There was no immediate answer. Barbara, listening, could imagine the man addressed as Maspar throwing out his hands and shrugging his shoulders, intimating that Monsieur Gault's destination was known to Allah alone.

An impatient exclamation escaped Robert Hassan. " It seems as though I am not so well served after all," he said.

" But, chief, what was Mahmoud to do ? He has left others who will watch and report to us. Monsieur Gault will not be three hours upon his way before you have word at Fassiut."

" And your men ? "

" Ready, chief, as they always are ready to serve a Hassan."

Barbara had a fleeting view of the two men as they passed the aperture in the curtains, Hassan's black and the flowing snow-white burnous worn by the man he had addressed as Maspar. They passed out on to the balcony and their further conversation became but a murmur. And then the girl heard steps pass down the paved pathway to the gate, the unbolting of the great door and the thud of a horse's hoofs upon the strip of paving that ran in front of the house.

And then silence, broken only by the softly-padding steps of someone in the courtyard ; the servant, perhaps, who had bolted the door behind the visitor of the night. Cautiously, Barbara parted the curtains an inch or two further, and looked into the room that held for her such hateful memories.

Robert Hassan had returned. He was standing immediately beneath the ruby-shaded light, and was gazing intently at some object which he held in his hand. Barbara caught the gleam of the light upon something that was dull greenish in colour, and upon the droop of a slender gold chain. For a moment she gazed fascinated, powerless to move, so that, had Hassan been less occupied, he must have seen her. Then, softly, she let the folds of the curtains drop again into place, and moved backwards. Her eyes were still upon the gleam between the curtains when she reached the courtyard. Turning, she ran swiftly up the stairs and into her room.

Strange that she had never given a thought to the ornament which Professor Gault had lent to her for the night of the ball. Now, as she remembered the anxiety in the voice of Basil's father when he had telephoned her to bring the necklet without delay to Hampstead, she wondered at her forgetfulness. No need, now, to ask what it had been that had taken Robert Hassan to Storm House upon the night of the dance. And as Barbara fitted into her puzzle this final piece, the pattern became clear to her. How clever Hassan had been, how quick to grasp the advantage that was his when Barbara came also to the museum in Hampstead! How deftly had he woven the strands of the web of chance into a pattern to suit his own ends! . . . And, but a few minutes ago, she had been about to throw all discretion to the winds and confront this man with murder.

Nothing further now from her mind. The knowledge that in some way danger threatened Basil tightened up the nerves of Barbara Manton as a player tightens the strings of his violin. The curtain was up indeed now for the playing of the drama. And the part which she, Barbara Manton, should play should be no small one. Guile should be met with guile. She would meet Robert Hassan in the morning as though nothing had happened between them out on the balcony that night.

The feminine in her told the girl that she need have no fear of Robert Hassan. For the sake of her lover she would, if need be, play the wanton, mould Hassan to her will, make of him instead of an enemy an unconscious ally. She would play upon his passion as . . .

"Jebel!"

The waiting-woman came from her room beyond the screen. "Madame called. I have been anxious. You have been down again to . . ."

"To Mr. Hassan? No, Jebel." She laughed lightly. "I think I have had about enough of Mr. Hassan for one night."

Jebel turned her great eyes upon her mistress. She could not quite understand. The blue eyes of madame were alight with almost happiness. . . . And had not Jebel but a little while ago seen the golden head bent in sorrow, heard her mistress sobbing her anguish out into the night?

Barbara stood by the window, watching the gently-swaying palm-tops as Jebel unfastened her dress. A wind was sighing softly from beneath the stars, a wind that sang the song of the desert . . . a wind that had no freshness.

Jebel sat late that night in her own little room. Kneeling upon the hard mosaic of the floor, she took from time to time little handfuls of sand from a bag which she carried slung beneath her *yelek* and allowed the grains to trickle through her brown fingers on to the floor. Bending, she would peer closely at the formation of the particles of sand, rocking to and fro, muttering to herself strange words in some Eastern tongue. Time and again would she scoop up the grains into her hand and let them fall back into her bag, then again repeat the process of divination.

" Why do you not go to bed, Jebel ? "

The woman started guiltily, scattering the little heaps of sand as she rose to her feet. Barbara had come into her room unheard.

" I thought, madame, that you were asleep."

" What are you doing there on the floor, Jebel ? "

The woman laughed nervously. " I but amuse myself. It is sand from the Desert of El Kabar. It draws pictures for . . . for those who can read them, madame."

" It has drawn pictures for you to-night, Jebel ? Give me some of the sand of El Kabar." Barbara held out her hand.

" It is foolishness, madame . . ."

" Give me the sand, Jebel. I also would like to be amused."

The brown-skinned hand fumbled beneath the *yelek*. A few grains of golden sand ran from her fingers into the white, cupped palm of Barbara Manton. Closing her fingers upon it, the girl nodded a good-night to her woman, laughed, and drawing her peignoir closely about her, walked back into her room.

Jebel watched her go. Into the deep-set eyes there had come a slumbrous brooding. It was as though a cloud had shadowed two deep forest-pools.

" . . . For those who can read them," she repeated softly to herself.

The sun was but a little way above the Lybian hills when Jebel awoke from uneasy dreams and remembered the things of the night. She rose from her couch and walked on naked feet to the archway that screened her room from that of her mistress. She listened to the even breathing of one who slept, then, parting the curtain, crept softly up to the divan where lay Barbara Manton.

The girl was sleeping peacefully, and judging from the half-smile that curved the corners of her mouth, her dreams were pleasant ones. One white rounded arm was beneath her head, and the unbound hair made a cascade of gold across the silk of the cushion. For a moment Jebel stood looking at her mistress, and then, as though suddenly remembering what had brought her to the room, looked about her on the floor.

The sand of El Kabar lay scattered upon the black and red of the mosaic by Barbara's divan. Scattered as it had fallen from the girl's hand the night before. Little meaningless heaps they had seemed to her as she had, with a laugh at her foolishness, composed herself to sleep. But Jebel, crouched upon her heels, gazed long and fixedly at the sand of El Kabar.

And Jebel did not laugh. " . . . For those who can read," she murmured to herself as she crept noiselessly back into her room.

The sun was sending its mellow shafts into her room when Barbara Manton awoke. She lay for a little while without moving, thinking over the things of the previous night, trying to separate the dreams from the realities and watching Jebel as the woman glided upon bare feet about the room, intent upon her duties.

In Barbara's mind was a certain satisfaction that at last the buttons were off the rapier-points, that the issue was at last joined between Robert Hassan and herself. The happenings of last night had stripped the last vestige of deceit from their relations. An exaltation took her as she told herself that she was in the camp not only of her own enemy but that of her lover; that in some way that would in good time be made known to her she might be of service to Basil. She knew now that whether Hassan had any—for want of a better name—" love " for her or no, such feelings were of but minor importance—a mere side-issue. She knew herself for what she was—a pawn in some great game, a game in which the rich treasure of the stones of Khor were the stakes.

A shadow flitted across her half-closed lids as Jebel crossed the room. Barbara smiled to herself as she watched the serving-woman bend over the little heaps of sand upon the floor.

" You can read the message, Jebel ? "

The woman started guiltily. " I did not know that madame was awake."

" But now that you do know you will please tell madame the reason for that little sigh I think I heard."

Jebel hesitated. She looked from the eyes of her mistress to the little heaps of the sands of El Kabar.

" What do you see, Jebel ? "

" I see many things, madame. Treasure, much treasure that has lain hidden these many centuries. There is fighting, madame . . . and bloodshed. . . ." The woman sank on her knees and swept the scattered sand together with her hands. "But madame does not believe in such things."

A strange smile came into Barbara's eyes. "I did not believe a little while ago. I think, Jebel, that Egypt teaches us much."

Jebel did not answer. She rose from her knees, and as she did so there came to the ears of the two women a sound of horses pawing the baked earth beneath their window. Barbara wrapped her dressing-gown about her shoulders, and followed the serving-woman across the room. Peering through the wooden lattice, she looked down into the courtyard.

Below was considerable activity. Two horses richly saddled stood before the entrance, a servant at each bridle. Other servants stood awaiting orders near by and, beyond the wall, little groups of Arabs clustered here and there in the shadows watching the proceedings with that vague air of detached interest so common to the races of the East.

Barbara stood for a moment in indecision; then, making up her mind, she commanded Jebel to assist her as quickly as might be with her dressing. If, as it seemed, Robert Hassan was about to set out upon a journey, he should not go without a word from her.

When the girl at last was satisfied with the reflection shown in her mirror, she sent Jebel below, the bearer of a message to her master. Five minutes passed then the door opened and Robert Hassan came into the room.

Never, to Barbara's way of thinking, had the man looked so handsome. Even her hatred for him could not disguise that fact. The change from London's fogs to the clean-swept airs of his native desert had worked wonders with the master of El Bahar. He stood just within the doorway, a smile curling the red lips. He flicked at his riding-boots with a thin, gold-mounted switch.

"You sent for me, Barbara."

"Yes . . . you are going away. . . . The horses out there . . . ?"

The man bowed. He was still smiling, a cruel, cynical smile. "For a few days only. I have business in Cairo."

"Connected with the ornament you stole from me that night out at Hampstead?"

It was a bow drawn at a venture. Barbara had scarcely known what she was about to say until the words were out, never to be recalled. One look at the face of the man standing before her told her that the shaft had sped true. The half-mocking smile passed, and Barbara involuntarily drew back from the demon she had raised. Hassan took a step forward, the hand about the stock of the riding-whip tightened until the skin of the knuckles grew taut as parchment. For a moment Barbara thought he was about to use it upon her. Then, recovering himself, he laughed.

"I had hoped, Barbara, to try and straighten matters out for you with the consul in Cairo. You were not yourself that night at Hampstead. The law can be merciful. I was in hopes that your madness had passed. I regret to see that I was mistaken."

Barbara Manton stiffened. "I do not pretend to understand the game you are playing, Robert Hassan, but I warn you that it is a dangerous one. I, too, can go to the consul at Cairo. Perhaps I may be more successful in proving my sanity."

The girl turned to the window as though to terminate the interview.

Robert Hassan stood for a moment looking hungrily at the graceful curve of the neck, the sheen of morning sunlight upon golden hair. Passion glowed deep in the dark depths of his eyes.

"Barbara Manton has yet to learn, it seems, that Robert Hassan is master in El Bahar. . . ."

The girl turned upon him, a cold fury in her eyes. "You threaten . . ."

The man held up his hand, enjoining silence. ". . . In El Bahar," he repeated, "and of everything and every man and woman in El Bahar."

For a moment after the man had left her Barbara leant against the lattice of the window, her hand pressed to her bosom as though to still the beating of her heart. She had not thought that the mention of the ornament would raise so violent a devil in Robert Hassan. The fact that it had done so merely confirmed all the suspicions that had been bred of Jebel's reading of the sand, and cleared the issues for her; but the girl was already asking herself whether she had not behaved foolishly in so exposing her hand to so desperate an enemy.

She called to mind the terror that had been painted upon Hassan's face as he had stood before her. She remembered the hand tightening upon the riding-whip. The thought that she had been there alone with the murderer of Basil's father numbed her senses. She knew that she was in his power. The knowledge that while she lived his secret was not safe, aroused in Barbara Manton the first real sensation of fear that she had known.

A step behind her in the room told her that Jebel had returned. She was standing where her master had so lately stood. Her eyes were wide with fear.

" Madame . . . what have you done ? "

" I don't know, Jebel. I don't know what I have done. I only know that I believe in the sands of El Kabar as I believe in my God."

Standing by the window, the two women watched Robert Hassan and a companion, a tall Arab in a snowy burnous, the visitor possibly of the night before, as they mounted their horses and rode across the courtyard and out into the square of the village. Once Hassan turned his head and looked up at the window at which they were standing half veiled by the lattice, but he made no sign, only laughed and passed some remark to his companion. Then, putting spur to his horse, Robert Hassan cleared the low wall and was soon but a little cloud of dust upon the desert.

Throughout the length of that day, life at El Bahar passed for Barbara as a dream. The azure of the sky, the gleaming walls of the houses, the feathery palms, all these were but as a backcloth against which a drama was being enacted of which she, Barbara Manton, was the heroine. The East, with all its glamour and nakedness, was closing in upon her. She felt as though the world as she had known it was no more ; that there was no London, no Chelsea, no Basil . . . only miles and miles of yellow sands—and Robert Hassan.

All that day she watched those sands, watched the changing of their tones . . . glaring ochre in the midday heat, mellowing with the going of the sun. All day long the girl lay upon her couch or stood at the window listening to the drowsy little noises.

That night Barbara dreamed a dream. It was as though a thin brown hand upon which gleamed a ring that she remembered to have once seen on Robert Hassan's finger in London stretched out of a purple distance—sinuous fingers twined about her like serpents. The hot wind of the desert—the wind that had no freshness—breathed upon her from the thousand throats of a thousand demons. . . . She awoke shivering . . . glaring with eyes of terror into the blackness. . . .

"Jebel . . . Jebel ! . . ."

Giant shadows came and went in grotesque procession across the ceiling. A moment later Jebel, a lamp in her hand, stood before her.

"Madame called . . ."

Barbara threw her arms about the woman's shoulders, clutching at her, clinging to her. "Take me away, Jebel . . . away anywhere where he will never find me. Just you and me, Jebel. . . . We will go to Cairo. We will find your daughter and you shall both come to England with me. I'd rather die out there in the sand . . . in the darkness. . . . I'm frightened, Jebel. . . ."

CHAPTER III

UPON an evening towards the end of March two men were seated taking their *apertifs* at one of the small tables set out upon the terrace of Shepheard's Hotel in Cairo. One of them we know at a glance, for Basil Gault had altered not at all since the day when he had attended the inquest upon his father in Hampstead, save that the strained look upon his face had lessened and the droop had passed from his shoulders. His companion, however, calls for introduction.

A slight, dapper little man in an immaculate suit of dove-grey, and a Homburg of even a more delicate shade of the same intriguing colour, and a monocle which people swore had been born with Bertie Traverson and had grown with that gentleman through boyhood to man's estate. The hair beneath the Homburg was brown, slightly shot with grey, and a small toothbrush moustache adorned his upper lip. A thin brown hand rested lightly upon the ivory head of a malacca cane as he leant across the table and spoke to Gault.

"I only got the note you posted last week in Alexandria this afternoon. I came over at once. I'm so sorry to have missed you on your previous visit. I can't bring myself to think of my old friend as having passed over. The tragedy of it, too!"

Basil reached out and pressed his friend's hand.

"Thanks, Traverson. It's wearing off a bit now. Strange what time will do."

"And change, Basil. You were wise to come over here away from all associations. The desert cures all ills . . . sorrow . . . love . . ."

"I had another reason, Traverson. By the way, you knew my father well, didn't you? I often heard him speaking of you and of the help your knowledge of the ways of Egypt was to him."

Bertie Traverson threw out his hands in a gesture of dissent. "The boot was on the other leg, my dear Basil. I owe everything to Professor Gault. When he was here in '13 he got me my present job with the Government. Sort of thing I had been hunting for for years. Hell of a job, too, I can assure you."

"But fascinating, I should say. Not many dull moments. As I say, my father used to say that Traverson knew the native life and character like a book."

"Like a whole library, old boy. And then some. Not a dirty job from Alexandria to Khartoum but Bertie Traverson's put on to it. I was back behind the Lybian Hills when you were over last month, and they couldn't very well get to me. Testy little tin chief kicking up his dusky heels a bit and wanted taming. Firm hand needed with some of these johnnies if they once get the bit between their teeth."

Basil felt a smile rising to his lips as he glanced at the exquisite little man seated before him so complacently sipping his Amer Picon. But the smile did not come. He remembered certain stories he had heard of "Curb" Traverson's activities among the wilder tribes of the desert hinterland, of the situations which he had handled practically alone to the subduing of mischief and the glory of the Empire. There were other stories, too, of doings in the Muski Quarter of Cairo, stories which, if one discounted fifty per cent. as a tribute to strict veracity, would still leave enough adventure and to spare to satisfy the soul of the most exacting of film heroes.

Basil told himself that the steel-blue eye behind the monocle could bend a man to Traverson's will as easily as the thin brown hand could enforce continued obedience to that will. Yes, if firm hands were to be in the game, Bertie Traverson's would not be far from the front rank. By such men are empires built up and kept up.

"I read the case when I got back from over there. I kept a file at the office of most of the London papers. It was a strange affair. But perhaps you'd rather not speak of it."

"It's what I came over here to see you about. But one hardly knows how to begin. The past few weeks have been such a welter of horror that I'm rather dazed. I'll collect my thoughts a bit, if you don't mind."

Basil lit a cigarette and sat looking out across the railings of the terrace on to the strange life of this strange city of romance. East jostled West, white-robed Arabs bargained with horn-spectacled tourists from Chicago. Camels lurched aside to allow the passage of motor-cars, the old making way for the new. Hawkers of doubtful antiquities thrust their wares through the railings, their black, cunning eyes alert for customers. Red-jerseyed porters of the hotel clustered in little groups about the steps, watching their chance to introduce their own particular scoundrel of a dragoman to prospective travellers. And above this chattering, laughing crowd the vault of the Egyptian night, deep indigo with its powdering of stars.

" . . . Assure my gentlemens . . . from the tomb of Rameses . . . Nineteenth Dynasty . . . guarantee my gentlemens . . ."

Basil glanced down at the little bronze figure of Seti which a wily Levantine was thrusting in lean, dirty fingers through the railing at his feet. One glance from his practised eye told him that the origin of the fake had not been a hundred miles from Birmingham, and with a keen look of appraisal at the imperturbable Traverson, the Levantine winked an eyelid solemnly and wasted no further time upon them. He passed on down the row of tables. They could hear his voice above the din of the street . . .

" . . . From the tomb of Rameses . . . my ladies . . . guarantee . . ."

Traverson turned to his friend. " Artful as a waggon-load of monkeys. It sickens me sometimes to see the poor fools being separated from their money. But what's the odds ? They'll go back to Idaho or Grand Rapids believing all they have heard. Isn't it Browning who said, ' It's thinking makes it so ' ? "

" I suppose the merchants would have their knife into you if you queered their pitch. Live and let live, eh ? Same time, there are things to be picked up among the clutter. Remember old Marston's find in the bazaar at Bizra ? "

" Followed by that distinguished gentleman's assassination in Alexandria. Yes, I remember. By the way, Basil, didn't I read something of a find you had made here in Cairo ? It was only a paragraph in one of the papers. I don't think it gave particulars."

Basil threw his cigarette stub into a palm-pot. He turned to Traverson. " I was going to tell you about that," he said.

Traverson glanced at him shrewdly. There was something in the tone of voice which Basil had used that suggested things to him.

" Anything to do with . . . ? "

" With my father's death ? . . . Why do you ask ? "

" Intuition. Tell me."

Silence for a moment. Then : " Ever heard of the Stones of Khor, Traverson ? "

Bertie Traverson laid a hand on Basil's arm. He glanced anxiously about him. "I should think it's hardly wise to . . . I think, Basil, that we'll go inside. There won't be many people in the American bar just now."

" But it's nice out here after that stifling wind and dust. Why the American bar ? We can get all we want out here."

Traverson lent forward and spoke in a whisper. " I'm thinking we'll be getting a bit more than we want if we go gassing about the Stones of Khor on the terrace at Shepheard's. You ought to know enough about Egypt to know that."

Basil coloured slightly and rose from his chair, and followed Traverson, who was already threading his way in and out between the tables, exchanging greetings to left and right as he made for the hotel entrance. And when the two men were seated in an alcove in the almost deserted Temple of Cocktails, Traverson spoke.

"Yes, Basil, you ought to know enough about Egypt to know that Khor is a dangerous subject. Now let's have it."

"Sorry, Traverson. I didn't know it was like that."

"And what makes you think that your find has anything to do with these . . . these wonders?"

"Because, Traverson, it fits in with another discovery. I have something more than an idea that the other Stone, the companion one, was the direct cause of my father's death."

The keen eye behind the monocle regarded the speaker. "This is rather interesting, Basil. Go on."

Basil paused for a moment. It was as though he hardly knew how to begin his story. "Did you know Sir Elmer Roacher, Traverson?"

"Only by name and through a slight correspondence. Bit of a bore with the authorities. I saw his death in the paper and the sale of his collection. Rather poor stuff, I should think."

"Except one piece, Traverson. Sir Elmer had, tucked away in his Welsh castle with a crackjaw name I can't remember, the other Stone. Of course he never knew it. My father bought it."

"Good God! . . ."

"It was what he said in one of his letters that set me thinking. He wrote that he had been passing down Jermyn Street on the afternoon of the sale and had looked in at the auctioneers. It was a wet day and, as you say, old Sir Elmer's collection didn't amount to much, and so there were very few people in the sale-room. My father bought the Stone with a lot of worthless clutter for a mere nothing. It was only when he was going through the lot out at Hampstead that he discovered the thing. I don't think for a moment that he knew what it was, but it was sufficiently interesting to set the dear old chap wondering. He sent a full description out to me, all the hieroglyphics and markings."

"You kept that letter?"

"Unfortunately—no. I looked for it the morning after I got it, but I must have mislaid it. Why?"

"Never mind. And then?"

"After that the news of the tragedy put everything else out of my head. It was the last letter I ever had from my father. His finding of the ornament synchronised almost to an hour with my find here in Cairo. Think of it! A little kiosk in the perfume bazaar in Cairo and an auctioneer's room in Jermyn Street. Pretty strange coincidence, eh, Traverson?"

The other man smiled. "To Western eyes, yes. But to one who knows the amazing laws—to call them that for want of a better name—that govern the things of the East it is not so strange. I've seen far stranger. That the Stones should lie apart for over two thousand years and then turn up within an hour of each other to unite and perhaps proclaim their message to the world isn't so strange as one might think. Go on, Basil. Didn't I read something of some girl being mixed up in the death of my old friend . . . some artist girl?"

There was silence in the room. Traverson, glancing at his companion, frowned slightly and bit at his little moustache.

"Sorry, old chap, if I've said anything . . ."

"Quite all right, Traverson. The girl is the girl I hope some day to make my wife. May I tell you a story, Traverson?"

"I knew there was a story. Yes, Basil, tell me."

And there in the American bar at Shepheard's, with the distant murmur of the Cairo streets and the elusive scent of the East about them, Bertie Traverson listened to the story which had sent Basil Gault out to Egypt. Since talking of the matter which was in his mind to Vera Peacock upon the evening following the inquest, Basil had mentioned his suspicions to no one. But in the man sitting beside him there was something that begat confidence. Apart from a question here and there, Bertie Traverson listened in silence. Once he rose from his seat, and walking swiftly to the window, threw a searching glance to right and left. Then, closing the sash, he returned to Basil and motioned him to proceed with his story—a story that was clearly of the utmost interest to Bertie Traverson.

The Egyptian night deepened. The big stars glowed like far-distant arc-lamps in the bronze-blue of the sky. A light wind from the Nile carrying on its bosom the thousand and one scents of Arabia swayed the feathery tops of the palms, and out in the grounds of the hotel fairy lights were pricking out here and there.

His story finished, Basil took from his letter-case two cuttings from the *Record*—one, the longer, giving a verbatim report of the proceedings at the inquest upon Professor Gault; the other, merely a paragraph relating to the arrest in Soho of a man named Harris through whom had been traced a vast conspiracy for the importation of drugs into England, which had led to an important raid being carried out by the police at a wharf in Limehouse. These two cuttings Basil handed across to his companion.

While Traverson was reading Basil glanced about the room. A native servant or two clad in cool white stood at the far end. The bar-tender was busy mixing drinks for a noisy group of Middle West tourists who, released from grandmotherly legislation, were making alcoholic hay while their sun was shining. Through an open window came the weird strains of native music . . . the laughter of women upon the terrace. . . . Then he saw that Traverson had finished reading the extracts, and was speaking to him.

"Looks as though the *something* which guides the fate of the Stones of Khor was getting busy. The old Egyptian gods have waited long enough, but they seem to be putting in some excellent team-work these last few weeks."

Basil looked at the speaker narrowly. For all the levity of his words, it was easy to see that Traverson was deeply impressed.

"You mean that the time is near when the Stones are coming together? Like some story out of the 'Thousand and One Nights,' what?"

"That's precisely what I do mean. I think a little cocktail wouldn't come amiss at this juncture. If we ask that descendant of the Prophet over there in the white coat to give us two Martinis in the name of Allah, it ought to be all right. . . . Waiter!"

Traverson remained silent while the man was serving them. Then when he was safely out of earshot:

"To the Stones of Khor . . . and to another reunion! Eh, Basil?"

The men raised the amber cocktails and drank.

"To another reunion . . . and my hand on the throat of the man who killed my father. You mustn't forget, Traverson, that I haven't a lot to go upon. Only the scarab. I'll swear the ring the police showed me was the one I gave Barbara. There may be duplicates, but I don't think so. Again, it might have been stolen from her in the same way that the Stone was stolen. She lost that, too, you remember. I'm only clutching at straws. The scarab was the particular straw that brought me out here to Egypt."

"A pretty hefty straw, old man, if I know anything about evidence. A few more of such straws and we'll weave a rope to hang friend Hassan with. Hang him high as Hamman . . . or was it Hummum?"

"You have heard of Hassan?"

Traverson nodded grimly.

"In the course of your official work?"

"Yes."

"But, Traverson, I don't want him hanged. Robert Hassan is my affair, my personal affair."

"But you wouldn't despise a little help in unearthing the fox?"

"No. I'm sorry, Traverson; what I said must have sounded ungrateful. What do you know of the swine?"

"The Hassan family has been a thorn in our side for many a long day. Old Hassan *père* was the wiliest devil in the three deserts. They've been importing cocaine and all manner of abominations into England for the last thirty years. Big Paris trade, too."

"Hassan's mother was French, wasn't she?"

"Yes. Old Hassan met her in Paris. A dancer, I think, at one of the Montmartre shows. When Paris got too hot for him he enticed her over here. You know what that means. Madame Hassan never saw her country again, and shortly after the birth of Robert she died. It was the only escape for her. Fancy she consoled herself a little with the Frenchmen who came over to see old Hassan on business. Don't blame her!"

"Robert Hassan lives here . . . openly?"

"Very seldom in Cairo. He has a big house facing the Bab-el-bouk, but its nearly always shut up. Interested in one or two dancing-halls in the Muski and other unsavoury quarters. Wonderful lot, the Hassans."

"He was pretty popular in London."

"I daresay. He's not in Egypt more than a month or two in the year. When he is, he's here, there and everywhere. Sometimes in the Fayuum, where he cultivates most of his cotton—that cotton which grows a mysterious kernel of cocaine inside the bales between the Mediterranean and the mouth of the Thames. Sometimes he's down the Nile as far as Assouam, and sometimes in his home in the Oasis of El Bahar. Bit of a wanderer, like his illustrious ancestors, who ravaged the desert from Fassiut to Timbuctu."

"I remember him telling me once up at Oxford that his ancestors were tomb robbers. Seemed quite proud of the fact. I looked upon it only as a story."

Traverson finished his cocktail and placed the little glass on the table. "A few centuries ago the Hassans ruled for a hundred miles south and west of Thebes. They levied tributes and were treated as chiefs. The gang was broken up from time to time, but the scattered units went to earth somewhere in the Lybian Hills and got together again as soon as the coast was clear. A pretty tough proposition for the authorities of their day."

Basil sat for a moment silent. His fingers were drumming nervously upon the table-top. "If I go to the police . . ." he began, and Traverson leant forward and laid his thin brown hand on the younger man's arm.

"Police nothing, Basil. We'll cut out the police. We don't want red tape trailing across the desert between here and Scotland Yard. Tangling stuff, red tape. You'd be asked all manner of awkward questions. How about the scarab which you failed to identify? Obstructing the police in the execution of their duty, what? No, Basil, my boy, we'll play this little game off our own bat."

"That was my idea originally. I only thought now that we have something definite . . . I mean about the raid in Limehouse . . . the authorities might handle it. Handle the London end of it."

Traverson shook his head. "Once the police come Sherlocking into this affair, Robert, who has a very army of spies round him, will bolt into some hidy-hole like a rabbit at the shot from a gun. Robert's a wily bird, and he knows Egypt like you know the palm of your hand. It's a hundred to six that he knows we're here talking in the American bar at Shepheard's at this very minute."

"D'you know where he is?"

"Not an earthly. But I'll find out within a few hours. That's what we're here for. And now is there any chance of a peep at this treasure of yours? By the way, to return to a painful subject, I hope that out there on the terrace was the first time you have chortled about the thing from the house-tops?"

Basil coloured. "I think so," he said; "not that it matters very much. It's well known that I've got it, or that I know where it is. Amazing how these things get about. Within a few hours of my buying the Stone here in Cairo I was attacked in the Ezbakiyeh Gardens and had the rule well run over me. Again in Marseilles. That was on my way back to attend the inquest."

Traverson looked grave. "Where is it now?"

"In the strong room here in Shepheard's."

"Good enough. We'll toddle along and have a look. I fancy it would be safer with me, all the same."

"But surely . . ."

"Yes, I know it's safe as a church and all that—but, well . . . there are crowds of natives hanging about here all the time. We men of the Secret Service have pretty good hiding-places. These damned Stones are gravitating inexorably one towards the other, and if I'm not very much mistaken, there's going to be trouble. Big trouble. There's an aura, call it what you like, about these things. The gods of old Egypt turning in their sleep, what? Elementals and efreets and all that."

Basil rose and led the way out into the corridor and along to the safe deposit. And, making sure that he was not observed, Traverson took the Stone of Khor in the palm of his hand and looked at it long and earnestly. Basil, glancing over his shoulder, viewed the ornament with something approaching indifference. Suddenly the Stone had ceased to interest him save in so far as it might be a link with Barbara, might perhaps lead him to her. The Treasure of Memphis he would willingly leave to other hands to discover. The death of his father had left Basil a comparatively rich man, and there was no need, so far as money was concerned, to meddle further in the affair of these Stones, which had brought so much tragedy in their wake. Let the Stones of Khor but lead him to the girl he loved and to his revenge, and he would ask nothing further of them.

"Curious little bauble, Basil. God, what it has seen! Something wicked about it, don't you think? I'll tell you the history of Khor one of these days if you don't already know it. One of the strangest pages in the whole romance of Egypt, if not the strangest. Slip it back, Basil, and we'll be getting a move on."

Basil laid the Stone back in its narrow steel-box and put the key in his pocket. Then the two men walked out on to the terrace.

Traverson held out his hand. "There's a deal for me to do if I'm to locate Hassan. And the sooner the better. He'll be lying pretty low now that the Limehouse affair has got into the papers. I'll ring you up or call for you at ten to-morrow. Good-night, Basil . . . and take care of yourself."

"Good-night, Traverson."

He stood at the head of the steps watching the slight, wiry figure of Bertie Traverson until it was lost in the crowd upon the Sharia Kamel. Then, heavy at heart, Basil Gault turned and made his way to the dining-room. He had but little appetite, and inactivity was irksome, but there seemed to be nothing that he could do except wait. Traverson had the matter in hand and would be already working for him. With that for the moment he must rest content.

CHAPTER IV

THE air in the Ezbakiyeh Gardens was a trifle chill as Basil turned in through the gates from the crowded streets. From the cafés came the rattle of coffee-cups and the weird cadences of native instruments. Girls would be dancing in there behind the carved screen-like windows, and there would be all manner of entertainment such as the wily Cairene so generously provides for the fat-pursed stranger within his gates. But such things were not for Basil Gault in his present frame of mind. Better far to walk with his own thoughts for company in the quietude that reigned in the shadow of the palms.

A certain vague depression was possessing him. Since leaving London he had been buoyed up by the thought that he was drawing nearer step by step to the end of his misfortunes, drawing nearer to Barbara. It was as though someone had told him that in Cairo he would find all fair sailing, that Hassan would be speedily run to earth and bent to Basil's will. And now for the first time he felt himself chained, as it were, by the heels; found inactivity forced upon him. It was as though he had suddenly been called upon to vacate the conductor's chair and play second fiddle in the orchestra of his own affairs. And it was a rôle that pleased Basil Gault not at all.

Not that he for one moment was regretting the interest that Bertie Traverson had taken in the matter of Barbara Manton and the Stones of Khor. But the recognition of Traverson's helpfulness made his position none the easier. Basil was far too good a sportsman to care upon whose shoulders the success of any enterprise with which he was connected should rest. Sufficient for him that success should be assured and surely no one in the length and breadth of Egypt, or, for the matter of that, in all the East, could be more fitting than Traverson to take in hand the affair that had brought Basil to Cairo. He had sought out this old friend of his father's to obtain his advice and help, and Traverson was giving both with lavish hand.

But now that he had to a certain extent shifted the responsibility, Basil was feeling the need of it. The prop that had held up his spirits seemed to have been suddenly knocked away from under him. As he walked the trim paths beneath the Ezbakiyeh palms, the distant melody of the band coming to him in little bursts of melody upon the scented breeze, he felt that he would give the world if he could be at that very moment in the thick of the hunt, in the forefront of the battle. With Traverson as an accepted ally he must be content to stand inactive until that gentleman should give the word to move. For the present he must satisfy himself with his imagination and the dreaming of dreams.

But imagination to a man situated as was Basil Gault is apt to become something of a curse, a thing that feeds upon itself until pigmies become giants, mole-hills mountains. And the Ezbakiyeh Garden is a wonderful place in which to weave dreams, in which to allow fancy to run riot. Beyond the mystic curtains of that purple night the man saw Barbara . . . somewhere out in the desert she was standing holding out her white arms to him. . . . He could see in her eyes that lurking dread that he had seen, or imagined that he had seen, upon that night when he had parted from her in Chelsea.

Upon that night it had been but a shadow, just as though a tiny cloud had passed across the face of the sun of her happiness. In his fancy Basil was again in Hassan's Daimler being driven along the fog-shrouded Embankment. He called to mind the little sigh that Barbara had given, the involuntary tightening of her hand as it had rested upon the sleeve of his coat. Again he saw the silhouetted head of Ali as he sat at the wheel, the dark, sinister face of Robert Hassan as he had leant forward to say something to Barbara.

The distant strains of the Ezbakiyeh band brought to his memory the dancing-salon of the Savoyard, the fragrance of the coffee being served at that little café over there beneath the palms brought before him again the scene in Vera Peacock's studio, when Ali had brewed for them the fragrant berry. Robert Hassan had told them that night, he remembered, that it was prepared from a receipt that had been handed down through generations of desert ancestors. They had joked with him about it, toasting the old tomb robbers in which Robert laughingly took so sinful a pride.

Robert Hassan. Basil stopped short in his walk and clenched his knuckles until the skin showed white. In a little while, please God, those hands would be about the throat of the man who had killed his father, the man who had robbed him of Barbara. That that time would come, Basil Gault well knew. Just as the Stones of Khor were working out their destinies, so was his destiny and that of Robert Hassan hastening to their climax. What was it that Traverson had said? Drawing inexorably together. The Stones of Khor—and Basil Gault and his enemy.

Perhaps, had he been in London, Basil would have laughed at his fancies and put them from him as idle dreaming; but here, in this wonderful Egypt, anything, everything was possible. Above his head the great blazing African stars looked down as serenely as they had looked down throughout the ages; as they had looked down upon other loves, other tragedies . . . age-old destinies became but the things of a moment, dynasties of a thousand years passed as though in a night.

For an hour the man walked the gardens as the shadows deepened and the black velvet of the Egyptian night took the Ezbakiyeh to itself, and the breeze that came up from the Nile grew cooler. The lights from the cafés dappled the dusky avenues between the palms with little arabesques of radiance, and through the lattice of the wooden windows Basil could see the Arabs squatting over their coffee, the shadows of dancers thrown upon the low ceilings.

At nine o'clock he passed out into the Sharia Kamel, and so to his hotel. A pipe out here on the terrace, and then he would try to sleep, waiting for the morrow to see what that morrow and Bertie Traverson might bring forth. The prospect of the night hours was a black one indeed for Basil Gault.

The crowd seemed not to have changed. The crowd that loiters and passes to and fro in the Sharia Kamel never does change. The same red-jerseyed porters, the same promenaders, the same chattering donkey-boys, the same mendicants and merchants, all atoms of a vast kaleidoscope for ever twisting and turning. That old fellow thrusting his box of worthless scarabs through the railings for his inspection—surely he was own brother to the ruffian who had tried to foist the spurious image of Seti upon Traverson and himself earlier in the evening. He was insistent, tapping with long brown fingers upon the railings that separated the terrace from the roadway.

Basil suddenly noticed that the old fellow was whispering, and that the whisper was clearly meant for his, Basil's, ears alone.

" A letter for my gentleman . . . from the lord who was with him here this evening. . . ."

So Traverson had moved sooner than Basil had expected. With a murmured prayer of thankfulness that he was at least to be spared a night of anxiety, Basil leant forward and took the dirty scrap of paper from the even more dirty fingers of the merchant of scarabs.

It was indeed from Bertie Traverson ; just a scribble upon the back of a dinner menu-card of the Eden Palace Hotel, asking Basil to come to him without delay. The bearer of the note would conduct him and show him straight up to his room in the hotel, thereby making unnecessary Basil's enquiring for him at the clerk's desk. Secrecy was, in effect, to be the essence of the contract. Also, the matter was urgent in the extreme.

Basil folded the card and placed it in his pocket. Then, signing to the man to wait at the foot of the steps leading up to the terrace, he entered the hotel, and, giving the key of his strong box to the clerk, requested that the packet which the box contained should be handed over to him. There was a note of urgency about Traverson's scribble that suggested that action might be imminent. And if action were in the air, it might even mean a hasty departure from Cairo, and Basil was in no mind to leave behind him his precious possession even in so secure a place as the strong room at Shepheard's. He placed the packet with Traverson's letter in the breast-pocket of his coat, crossed the lobby to the American bar, ordered and drank a whisky-and-soda, and passed down the steps and out into the Sharia Kamel.

The merchant of the scarabs was awaiting him. " My gentleman wishes that I show him to my lord Traverson now ? "

" As soon as ever you like, my good Ibrahim, or whatever your name is."

The thin lips of the native creased into a smile of sorts, displaying a line of discoloured stumps that set Basil thinking of old tombstones in a country churchyard. And having thus expressed his appreciation of the sparkling humour of " my gentleman," he turned and shouldered a way through the crowd.

As his guide led him along the streets towards the Bab-el-Bahri, Basil asked himself whether he were altogether wise in trusting himself so blindly to this mysterious stranger who purported to be a messenger from his friend. Undoubtedly the writing upon the card had been in the same hand as that of many letters he had seen from Traverson to his father in Hampstead, but, after all, one's memory without examples to refresh it by can easily be at fault. Easy, too, for handwritings to be imitated.

There was something furtive in the droop of the shoulders of the man who was striding along a few paces in front of him that did not altogether inspire confidence, something that . . . But Basil Gault shook from him the growing feeling of doubt. After all, very few of the natives who hung round the tourist centres of the city appeared any more honest.

Besides, had he not been praying for action ? And now that his wish had been granted him, he was hesitating like a coward afraid for his own skin. Naturally, Traverson, in the secret service to which he had given half a lifetime, would employ many strange messengers ; much more likely he would choose devious paths to reach Basil rather than trust his business to the telephone, and risk having Gault's name shouted by page-boys through the rooms and corridors of Shepheard's. Publicity had no place in an affair such as they had in hand.

Basil did not care very much either way. If this were a trap it were preferable to be walking through the streets of Cairo at the heels of a villainous-looking native to lying tossing sleeplessly from side to side in a hotel bed. If it were a trap . . . Basil, looking about him, saw that the street into which his guide had at that moment turned was narrow and ill-lighted, with white walls on either hand—walls pierced here and there by wooden lattices and heavy iron-studded doors. The place was silent, sinister, breathing of evil. Also there was a feeling in the air as though instead, as he had thought, of leaving the river behind him, he had come closer to it.

He stepped a pace forward and touched his guide on the shoulder. " I say, Ibrahim, this isn't the way to the Eden."

The man half-turned and spoke over his shoulder. " My lord Traverson he say to me that I should bring his gentleman not by the ways of light. My lord Traverson he say very strongly so. My lord Traverson he think that . . ."

" Never mind what my lord Traverson thinks. I asked you if this was the way to the Eden. Seems to me that we are going in the opposite direction. Never mind. Lead on."

The native bowed, threw out his hands before him, and resumed his pacing forward. A moment of hesitation and Basil followed. After all, if this were a snare it was rather late in the day to mend matters. He was already trapped. There was no retreat. A few more steps into the narrow lane and all escape would be cut off should anyone appear either before them or behind them. To his left a high wall above which the feathery tops of palms waved slightly in the breeze, to his right a lower, surrounding what appeared in the uncertain light to be the garden of one of the better class Cairene villas.

Basil slipped his hand into the pocket of his light overcoat and felt for the butt of his automatic. He smiled grimly as he took away his hand from the empty pocket. Evidently friend Ibrahim added to his other qualifications that of expert pickpocket. The cards were on the table at last ; there was truly to be no turning back from this adventure.

He drew up sharply and, turning, leant his back against the wall, his hands held ready for defence. The decision had come to him with the loss of his pistol to force the issue, to try conclusions without delay with the wily Ibrahim. If, which was most unlikely, the man should prove honest, no harm would be done, and a few coins would soon heal any wound that his pride might have suffered through unjust suspicion. If, however, the man were not honest, Basil would at least have the satisfaction of knowing that he had not been caught unprepared.

But all doubts were set at rest and the issue before him made quite clear when he saw that his guide had drawn away from him, an inscrutable smile creasing up his thin lips. In the half-light of the narrow way Ibrahim's face appeared a mask of evil. Basil wondered why he had, even for a moment, trusted the man . . . and yet was glad that he had done so.

And then, perhaps because his own action had hastened their plan of attack, they were upon him. From a doorway in the high wall and from the coping of the low three men with short sticks were suddenly about him. If Basil had craved for action, his craving was to be satisfied to the full. There surged up in him a fierce joy. It was as though Robert Hassan himself and all that Hassan stood for was symbolised in the three men before him. Each face became the face of the man whose smile at the Savoyard had filled him with so curious and sudden a feeling of anger, so clear a sense of foreboding.

Two of the men he laid low with short half-arm jabs, and then, before he could recover his lost balance, his guide, who hitherto had remained quiescent, took a hand in the battle and brought it to a swift and inglorious conclusion. With a deft diving movement the man caught his legs in a tackle above the knee. Basil saw the short stick of the third man raised high, saw it poise a moment in mid-air . . . and fall . . . a cry . . . the fleeting vision of a girl's face looking down upon him from a window, horror-struck. . . .

He felt his legs being dragged away from under him as by the undertow of huge seas. A sickening blow took him upon the forehead. He fell backwards . . . downwards . . . downwards into blackness . . . and with him there seemed to be drawn that visionary face with wide, dilated eyes . . . in his ears the echo of the cry that he had heard.

CHAPTER V

It was precisely ten o'clock upon the following morning when Mr. Bertie Traverson entered the office in the foyer of Shepheard's Hotel and enquired of the clerk in charge for Mr. Basil Gault. The page-boy who took the message up to that gentleman's bedroom returned with the tidings that Mr. Gault was not in his room, and that from the appearance of that room Mr. Gault had not returned to it since leaving the hotel the evening before. No, there had been no message left for Mr. Traverson. If Mr. Traverson would be so good as to leave his card the clerk would see to it that Mr. Gault received it the moment he returned.

Mr. Bertie Traverson thanked the clerk in charge, told him that it was a matter of little importance, wished him good-morning and, being trained not to show surprise even if the heavens should fall, passed out into the sunshine of the Sharia Kamel. For the space of a quarter of an hour he mixed with the crowd wandering aimlessly up and down, then made his way back to the terrace. Those who know Traverson well—and they are very few indeed—will tell you that when that gentleman gnaws his moustache he is as near to being roused as it is possible for Mr. Bertie Traverson to be.

Surely not for many moons had the moustache of the Secret Service man been subjected to such hard usage as upon this morning as he sits upon the terrace of Shepheard's watching the crowd beneath him and toying with the ivory handle of his malacca. But the eye behind the immovable monocle was as steady as ever, the hand upon the cane-head as firm.

Enquiries among the hotel servants had elicited but a single fact that seemed to be worth the trouble of following up. Basri, one of the red-coated porters, calling fervently upon Allah to witness as to the truth of which he spoke, told of seeing the English gentleman walking near the hotel in company with one of the vendors of antiquities who infested the terrace. Upon being pressed to describe this particular villain, Basri had looked sideways and had sworn by all that he held most sacred that, the light being so deceptive, he had not been able clearly to see the man's face. And Traverson, being well versed in the crooked and devious ways of the East, and recognising that the fellow was trying to serve one master while going in deadly fear of another, did not press the question further.

It was upon this thinnest of thin threads that Traverson had been busy the better part of the morning until, baffled at all points, he had made his way back to Shepheard's, regarding the hotel as the pivot about which the life of Cairo swung and as being the likeliest place for chance or Providence to throw something in his way. Had he been in London he would have haunted Piccadilly; if in Paris, he would have taken that intriguing little table on the terrace of the Café de la Paix that faces the corner of the Opera. At all these points the world passes to and fro.

Point by point the man was going over the story that had been told to him by Basil on the previous evening. The history of the Stones of Khor had always interested him, and to find himself suddenly mixed up in their destinies thrilled him. Had it not been for the unfortunate contretemps of Basil's disappearance he would already, he told himself, have been far advanced in his preparations for the locating of Barbara Manton as a preliminary to the unearthing of the treasure of Memphis.

With that achievement he promised himself that he would rest content. It was such a coup as he had been waiting for these many years. With its accomplishment he would put the East and all its ways behind him, and return to civilisation. After all, Traverson had to confess to himself that he was beginning to hanker for things other than feathery palms and sun-drenched desert; other companions than dry-as-dust officials and shifty-eyed Arabs. The West was a-callin' even as the East had done in his younger years, the shady side of Bond Street in the season, the corner of the club bridge-room overlooking the Green Park.

He had promised himself that this should be his last year of delving into the devious ways of Egypt, and now the mere mention of the fabled Stones of Khor had set his heart again racing along the road of adventure. To wrest from its hiding-place the treasure buried over twenty centuries ago by the priests of Memphis would set a seal upon his career as a Secret Service man that would send his name and that of Basil Gault ringing round the world. It would send

Mr. Bertie Traverson into his well-earned retirement with a brow crowned with laurels. The fact that by so doing he would put a spoke in the wheel of Robert Hassan but added zest to the affair.

He leant back in his wicker chair, gnawed viciously at his moustache, half closed his eyes and gave himself up to dreams. There was a very desirable suite of rooms, he remembered, in Half Moon Street, the very thing for a bachelor who . . .

" From the tomb of Rameses, my lady . . . of a guarantee . . ."

The man in the wicker chair came back to earth and turned his head in the direction of the whining cry of the same old rascal who had attempted to impose upon him the night before when he had sat on the terrace with Basil. So the old thief was at his games again. The long brown fingers holding out a plaster image of Seti, the thin, bloodless lips mumbling lies, the eager, hawk-like eyes fixed upon a girl who was leaning forward eagerly from her chair near the railings. A girl who, curiously enough, fitted in most admirably with Mr. Bertie Traverson's dreams of civilisation.

A very pretty girl she was, a dainty vision that might have stepped straight out of Phyllis Court in regatta week. From the aigrette in her smart little toque to the toes of her smart little shoes she was a vision of white perfection, cool and infinitely restful to eyes long accustomed to the hot tones of the desert. The face was small and piquant, with big, wondering grey eyes and hair like leaves in early autumn. The small, gloved hand was outstretched to take the image of Seti from the native, and Traverson, smiling, waited for the culmination of the well-worn trick.

A deft twist of the lithe brown fingers as the little figure changed hands, and the image lay upon the paving of the terrace shattered into a hundred pieces. A cry of dismay from the girl, a whine of utter despair from the merchant at the loss of so great a treasure. Traverson gave the girl time to reach for her gold-mesh purse, then, rising, he made his way towards where she was sitting.

"If I may be permitted," he said, "as a fellow-traveller who knows the crooked ways of the East . . ."

And walking to the edge of the terrace, he shot a few words in Arabic to the gesticulating native, kicked the fragments of the unfortunate Seti into the gutter, and turned again to the bewildered girl.

"An unpardonable liberty, but I really could not sit there and see you imposed upon by that rascal. An old trick."

The big grey eyes seemed perplexed. "But it was from the tomb of . . . somebody. He was just telling me."

Traverson smiled. "I'll wager that our friend has a dozen more Setis in his basket, and when those are all broken like this one he'll send to Birmingham for more. You will pardon me ? "

The grey eyes became clouded. "I'm very much afraid you're laughing at me."

"Anything but that. And you don't mind my butting in ? "

"I think it's very good of you. But he had such an honest face. The poor dear nearly cried when I knocked the thing out of his hand. Won't you sit down?"

The man bowed. "If you think the freemasonry of travel is sufficient excuse. My name is Traverson—Bertie Traverson. Credentials, unimpeachable. Address, Hotel Eden Palace. Club, Travellers. Hobbies, poking my long nose into all sorts of queer things and into everybody's business but my own."

This time the girl bowed. The ice, if there had ever been any between them, was thawing nicely.

"Sounds like a page out of 'Who's Who.' My name is Peacock—Vera Peacock. Credentials, vague. Qualifications, alleged artist. Hobby, talking to perfect strangers without the formality of an introduction. Address, Chelsea in Bohemia."

Traverson had taken a seat. This encounter promised to be amusing. "So that," he said, "is that."

And straightway fell into a silence and to the gnawing of his poor, ill-used moustache.

The girl eyed him curiously. "For an acquaintanceship so brilliantly begun . . ." she said with a little pout of the red lips, and Traverson came with a start out of his abstraction.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was thinking. Your name is familiar somehow. Perhaps your pictures . . ."

But Vera Peacock shook her curls. "Afraid not. One little water-colour skied in the Academy in 1916—you know, the year when all the good artists were at the war—does not constitute an international reputation. More likely you read it in . . ."

The girl checked herself, but it was too late. The thread of memory had connected in Traverson's brain. Upon his leaving Basil upon the previous evening he had returned to his office and searched pretty thoroughly the files of the *Daily Mail,* absorbing all that he could find that bore even remotely upon the Storm House Mystery.

He looked up sharply. "The inquest on Professor Gault, of course. I was reading only last night the . . . But if you'd rather not speak of it, Miss Peacock —I mean, if you have come over here to forget . . . It was clumsy of me."

"Not at all, Mr. Traverson. I have no particular wish to forget. On the contrary."

"Meaning ?"

"Well, I've come to Egypt so as not to . . . well, not to drop right out of the story."

"I don't quite follow."

The dainty pointed toe of one white suede shoe toyed with a fragment of the defunct Seti. "I had quite a lot of reasons. Tons. I like adventure. I like being *in* things. I like to see the name of Vera Peacock in the papers. I'd like to have a column in the *Times* about my pictures for preference, but as the critics appear to be stone-blind or can't lay their heads upon a pen, one cannot be a chooser. Besides, one can make more solid reputation in a minute by scandal than you can if you go on painting for a dozen years."

"Scandal, Miss Peacock ?"

"Oh, I don't mean anything particularly wrong! But to be in a sensational case like the Storm House Mystery does one no end of good. See what I mean ?"

"Quite."

"But you don't approve."

"I didn't say so."

"But you looked it. I'm afraid I've shocked you."

"Not in the least. I'm more than interested. Tell me about the case."

"I'm a friend of Barbara Manton's, that's all. And I knew Robert Hassan and Basil Gault and all of them. There's a warrant out against Barbara. I thought I might be able to help her in some way. That's not what I really came out for." A look of elfin defiance came into the grey eyes. "You see, I'm working this stunt for all its worth. If I can keep it alive till sending-in day at the Academy I'll be hung on the line for sure. D'you hunt?"

"I had a couple of runs with the Cottesmore when I was home last time. Why?" Really this inconsequential little person was getting very amusing.

"Because if you hunt you'll understand exactly how I feel. Just as if I'd taken a toss and my horse had gone on without me. I just hate being out of the hunt."

Traverson laughed. "Yes, I think I know exactly how you feel. We're two of a kind, Miss Peacock. Thirst for adventure, and all that. Well, I think we can rustle up a bit of adventure all right for you out here in Egypt."

"You mean deserts and sheiks and all those dreadful thrilling things we read about in novels? Sax Rohmer and Hichens and . . ."

"Oh, I don't say that I can promise you all that. And so you knew my friend, Basil?"

The girl leant forward. "Do you know Basil Gault?"

"I knew his father, too. I've bad news for you about Basil."

"Not . . ."

"We don't know anything yet, Miss Peacock, except that Basil disappeared from this hotel last night. I'm hoping he's safe, but to tell the truth, Basil wasn't too discreet in talking about something out here on the terrace during the evening. He hasn't been seen since."

"You think something has happened to him . . . something dreadful ? "

Traverson's face was set in grim lines. "When a man, an Englishman, disappears in Cairo it is always serious. Not necessarily dreadful. I'm making all the enquiries I can. You are staying here at Shepheard's, Miss Peacock ? "

"No. At the Eden Palace. You're there, too, didn't you say ? "

"I've a room there permanently. And now, for the moment, we won't allow Basil Gault to worry us more than is absolutely necessary. He may have taken the fit to go and see the desert by moonlight and gone further than he meant to go. I've several agents at work, and I'll be having their reports this afternoon. I know where you are. I will let you know as soon as I know anything myself. And now that we are allies in this affair, we might have a council of war—shall we call it ?—over lunch. Agreeable ? "

And so it was as firm friends and trusted allies that Bertie Traverson and Vera Peacock entered the dining-room at Shepheard's. Throughout the well-served meal the girl's eyes were clouded. It was not easy for her to put from her mind that Basil was in peril, not easy for her to believe in Traverson's well-meant fiction of seeing the desert by moonlight.

But Mr. Bertie Traverson managed to bear up remarkably well. He was versed in mysteries, and had in the course of his extensive sojourn in the East absorbed some of its fatalism. He could do no more for his friend than he had done, and Bertie Traverson allowed his mind to wander somewhat from Basil Gault, the Stones of Khor and Robert Hassan, and gave himself up to the pleasurable present.

And it is so easy to forget the past and let the future take care of itself when one gazes over the gold-necked apex of a bottle of Cliquot into eyes of wonderful grey.

CHAPTER VI

THE senses of Basil Gault returned to that gentleman slowly at first, then with a bewildering rush of memories. He was in complete darkness, and about him hung an unbroken silence. For the space of perhaps three minutes he lay motionless, peering forward in vain effort to pierce the void of nothingness in which he appeared to be, as it were, suspended. And, the silence remaining unbroken, he took courage and so moved his cramped limbs that he was able to turn and raise himself cautiously upon an elbow. More than that he did not dare until such time as he should have learnt at least something of his immediate whereabouts, gathered something of his immediate past.

Little points of fire danced and shot hither-thither before his eyes, and his brain was as molten lead seething within a cauldron. Stretching out a hand, it met only empty air; lowering it, he felt his fingers come to rest upon a mat-like surface, a thin covering beneath which, as the exploring hand slid forward, was a hard floor, cold to the touch as though of stone. A curious earthy smell that set the man thinking of vaults mingled with the thousand and one scents of the East. Basil leant his aching head back upon the cushion which had served him as a pillow, and asked himself what this was all about . . . how . . . why . . . where ?

Gradually, as a swimmer coming up through the water into the upper air, clearness came to him, and he was able to arrange the welter of memories into something approaching ordered sequence. He remembered his talk with Bertie Traverson upon the terrace of the hotel ; remembered also that gentleman's departure. After that he had walked alone in the Ezbakiyeh Gardens ; he remembered the soft airs, the distant music of the band, the sway of the palm-tops against the evening sky, the shadows of dancers within the cafés.

He had left the garden and returned along the Sharia Kamel to the hotel. . . . Then had come the man he had called Ibrahim, and the letter that had purported to come from the Eden Palace Hotel. The prayer that he had sent up from his heart that he might be accorded action had been answered swiftly and fully for, truly, no longer was he out of the running, but up to the very hilt in it. He even wondered whether, so far as he was concerned, the affair was not already over.

As the mists cleared from his brain the darkness about him became peopled with pictures as the former scenes in a story are thrown back upon the screen of a cinema. Ibrahim was there, his leering face creased into a hateful smile. Basil could see the broken teeth. The white walls of houses rose before and behind him, and there were those others with their upraised sticks. He could see their shadows dancing upon the white plaster of the walls in the narrow street as they leapt upon him. The fight had not been of long duration, the odds had been too heavy for that; but while it had lasted it had been a merry one. At least two of his opponents had bitten the dust before he himself had gone down. There had been a cry . . . a girl in the picture somewhere . . .

Basil closed his eyes and concentrated. Yes, the cry had come from an open window a little to the left of where the fight had been in progress—a small, latticed window set high in the wall. There had been a square of soft, rosy light, and the girl's figure had been silhouetted for one fleeting moment against it, the glow from the room behind her just flushing the rounded cheek as she had leant forward to look down into the street. Curious how this picture had painted itself upon his mind. The last thing he had seen, no doubt, and for that reason the most clearly defined of his waking impressions. Then, if he remembered rightly, had come the unlooked-for agility on the part of the ancient Ibrahim, and darkness had fallen like a curtain, blotting out Ibrahim and the others, and the girl and all his world.

And then, reminiscence being unproductive, Basil Gault wiped from his mind all thought of the past, immediate or distant, and turned his energies solely to the uncharted future. Moving with an infinite caution, he raised himself—surprised to find that if he were, as he supposed, a prisoner, his captors had not considered it worth while to bind him—into a sitting position, and so on to his feet.

With a little catch at his heart he felt in his breast-pocket. He had not expected to find himself still in possession of the Stone, but he cursed himself bitterly for not leaving it in the safe keeping of Shepheard's. Traverson had been right when he had said that the Stones of Khor should not be shouted from the housetops. Surely, when the first suspicions of Ibrahim had crossed his mind, he should have returned to the hotel even if it had meant an undignified retreat, and not allowed his thirst for action to steal from him the caution upon which he had so often prided himself.

A sickening feeling of insecurity took him as he stood swaying slightly, his arms outstretched into the void. It was as though he stood alone upon the very edge of a precipice which towered aloft in some great world of darkness, and where the next step might send him hurtling down into eternity. Then, inch by painful inch—for every limb of him seemed to ache with its own particular torment—he moved his feet and made progress forward. And as with each halting step the ground struck hard and firm beneath him, the man gained confidence and increased his pace.

A matter of twenty steps, and his outstretched finger-tips came into contact with the chill roughness of a wall. Turning to the left along the wall and counting carefully his steps, Basil fingered his way to another wall. Here he repeated the process, and by a series of rough calculations, estimated that he was in an oblong chamber with broken plaster walls and a stone slab floor upon which here and there had been thrown a few rugs.

The place was, as far as he could make out, devoid of furniture save where, in a shallow recess, some projecting structure of wood had impeded his progress.

One doorway only there seemed to be, set beneath a low arch and leading apparently into a passage and so on into the unknown. And with this limited estimate of his location Basil had for the moment to rest content.

There were matches in his pocket, but for the moment the man decided against their use. The showing of a light could not fail to advertise the fact of his return to consciousness to those who might, for all he knew, be watching. As it was, he had before him a few priceless moments in which to think unhampered.

Falling upon his hands and knees, he crept on through the low archway and out into the passage beyond. A narrow tunnel-like passage it was, and wide enough only to admit of the passing of a single person. At irregular intervals there were openings, and here and there a stout iron-studded door, but never a chink or crack that showed a light. Baffled, he turned to go back to his chamber, fearful that he might lose what slight bearings he had obtained were he to explore further. For perhaps twenty yards he crept back towards the archway, then paused.

From somewhere along the passage came footsteps—light, slippered footsteps that slithered upon the stone flooring. Reaching out a hand, Basil found that he was abreast of one of the openings in the wall, and bending nearly double, he made his way along it until a turn in the way cut him off from the main passage. Here he crouched motionless. The slither of the footsteps sounded ever nearer.

And although he was cut off from the passage he could see a faint ochre come and go upon the walls near him from a lamp or candle carried by the person who was proceeding towards the chamber in which he had been lying. It passed like the gleam of sunlight through storm-clouds, leaving Basil to a darkness that seemed deeper even than before. The steps died away, and silence fell again.

He waited a moment, then made his way back, slipping the shoes from his feet and carrying them in his hand towards the room he had so lately vacated. As he neared the end of the passage a soft light told him that his visitor had already reached the place of his confinement. From the shadow cast by one of the pillars of the archway he glanced within. He had been right in his estimate of his prison-house. The rough yellow walls, the single entrance, the stone slab floor, all had been as he thought. A small, low stool, that by some miracle he had escaped falling over in his tour of inspection to and fro in the room, stood near the heap of tumbled mats upon which he had been lying. The object that had impeded his progress round his prison-house proved itself to be a large meshrebiyeh screen placed at an angle to the wall. All these things he took in at a glance ; then his eyes fell upon the occupant of the room.

A girl of perhaps nineteen. She was standing by the tumbled mats as though she had not yet recovered from her amazement at the absence of the man who should have been lying upon them. She had placed the lamp upon the low stool, and the light threw upon her face the sheen one sees upon the stage thrown from footlights. And there was something in the flush upon the rounded cheek that stirred a memory within Basil Gault. Just such a girl it had been who had looked down from the window while he had been fighting in the narrow Cairene street.

She was dressed in a short dancing-skirt of green silk upon which was worked a design of tiny arabesques in copper thread. Her hair, black as the wing of a crow, was unbound and hung almost to her waist in curling waves. A head-dress of tarnished silver came low down upon her brow, and her little arched feet were thrust into a pair of heelless slippers. Standing there motionless, the smoky gleam of the lamp playing upon her and throwing a distorted shadow upon the dirty yellow of the wall, the girl made a picture not easily to be forgotten.

" You were looking for me . . . ? "

She wheeled round with a little strangled cry. Basil had spoken in French, and it was clear that he had been understood. The girl shrank back from him as though she had expected a blow. The great black eyes gazed out from the olive-tinted face like the eyes of a fawn.

Basil smiled as he advanced into the room. " There's nothing to be frightened about," he said. " If you are my gaoler . . . well, here I am. I suppose you thought I had escaped ? Though how I was to get out of this hell-hole beats me."

The smile and his easy way of speaking brought back to the frightened girl a certain composure. She pointed to a basket that stood upon the ground by the stool.

" I brought you food," she said simply.

Basil leant down and lifted the white cloth which covered the mouth of the basket. Then smiled broadly at the girl.

"Excellent! A loaf, some fruit . . . wine. You do your prisoners remarkably well. I suppose that I must consider myself a prisoner?"

"Monsieur was brought here last evening. I was told that you had had an accident."

Basil smiled grimly. "Yes. An accident will serve. Accident is decidedly good. Cairo is known for its accidents to Englishmen, Miss . . . ?"

"Zelie, monsieur."

"Miss Zelie. Good! Romantic, and comes trippingly to the tongue. We're going to be great friends, Zelie, you and me."

He lifted up the basket as he spoke, and took from it a napkin containing the better part of a fowl. Looking up, he caught the hungry eyes of the girl.

"I'm afraid, Zelie, that they do the prisoners better in this place than they do the staff. If Miss Zelie will honour Mr. Gault by joining him in this elegant but simple repast . . . ? You see, we can talk as we eat. How, by the way, is my most honourable and excellent friend, Mr. Robert Hassan?"

"You know my lord Hassan?"

Basil laughed. "Know him? Bosom pals for years."

"But why should you think that I know my lord Hassan?"

"Deduction, Zelie. Sherlock Holmes stuff. I'm attacked in the streets of Cairo by four—I think it was four—infernal ruffians, and whisked away to these salubrious quarters. I'm told that I've had an accident. Now, the only enemy I have in the wide, wide world is our friend Robert, who also happens to be in Cairo. *Voila*, Mr. Robert Hassan had a hand in my adventure, or rather my accident. Not very far off the mark, eh ? "

The girl paused for a moment. Then : " This is Robert Hassan's house," she said.

" I thought so. Private house ? "

" No, a café . . . the Green Figs. My lord Hassan controls many such in Cairo."

" And you ? "

" I am my lord Hassan's slave."

" Oh, come, Zelie ! I can't have that, you know. There are no slaves in Egypt. English protection, and all that, you know. We'll take a look into this slave business when we've eaten. A little wine, Miss Zelie ? By the way, how well you speak French."

" My mother was maid to a French lady. My lord Hassan's mother. She was from Paris, and Robert Hassan's father brought her to his home in the desert at El Bahar. She died there later of a broken heart, and my mother . . . But I don't know why I am telling you all this, monsieur. If I am caught I will be beaten." The child was looking about her with fear writ large in her lovely eyes.

Basil placed a hand upon her rounded arm. " There won't be any beating while I'm around. So don't worry about that. And now I'll tell you why you are telling me all this. It's because you know a friend when you see one. We're going to be great friends, Zelie, as I said, and you're going to tell me a whole heap more. First, what do you do in this house of my friend Hassan ? "

"Dance . . . and amuse my lord's friends and customers."

Basil looked at her pityingly. "I see. Poor child! Look here, Zelie, you're going to tell me your story. The whole of it. Not now, unless you like." He looked at the sweet contour of the girl's face. "I know it's a pretty rotten one, but we're going to put things straight. Do you know, Zelie, I'm rather glad they knocked me over the head out there in the street. I fancy there's going to be another black mark scored up against the name of Robert Hassan. Here's to our very good meeting, little friend Zelie."

The man raised the flask to his lips. For the first time a smile curved about the soft mouth of the girl. A smile that was good to look upon, a smile that was like the breaking of sunlight upon a sea of storm. But as Basil looked at her, the smile became frozen . . . fear again looked out from the magic pools of her eyes. From a little way away there came the banging of a door.

Basil, who had seated himself upon the edge of the stool, leapt to his feet. "Here, Zelie, behind the screen! A rotten hiding-place if they start looking, but it's all there is. Our only chance of helping each other. Understand, Zelie . . . each other?"

For the fraction of a moment the girl hesitated. Natures broken as Zelie's had been upon the wheel find it hard to strike away the shackles. Then, at the gentle pressure of Basil's hands upon her shoulders, she looked up into his eyes and took to herself some of the man's courage.

When Robert Hassan entered the room it was to see nothing but a somewhat dishevelled Englishman seated upon a corner of a stool, flask in hand, and gnawing complacently at the leg of a chicken. Hassan stood just within the doorway, looking down at his prisoner.

Basil placed the bone upon the floor, wiped his fingers delicately upon the napkin, and smiled. " That you, Hassan? Come right in. Quite a decent little meal they give you here. Not quite so *recherché* as some we have had together, and there doesn't seem to be any music. However . . . by the way, Hassan, perhaps you will be so good as to return to me a certain little trinket I had on me when I came to this hotel. I expect they've put it in the strong room for safety. A devil of a lot of thieves about in Cairo, Hassan."

" So I'm told."

Basil looked up sharply. " D'you know, Hassan, I don't like the tone of that. Doesn't sound altogether matey."

" It sounds, Gault, precisely what it is. We'll stop this fooling, if you don't mind. We've quite a deal to settle between us."

" And my trinket? I'm afraid I can't talk till I've looked into that little matter."

" To hell with your trinket! Look here, Gault, I'm afraid you have never quite understood me. I'm somewhat of a complex character."

" Sort of hybrid, eh? "

The Egyptian shrugged his shoulders. " If you care to call it so. A mixture of East and West, we will say. When you saw me last I was West. Now I'm East. You see, Basil, one has to cut out a distinct line sooner or later. I've tried London and I've tried the desert. And I've made my choice."

Basil held up a hand. "Steady, Hassan, steady! Let's get this straight. Suppose we say, just for argument's sake, that the choice has been forced upon you. Shall we say by Scotland Yard? Suspected murder, abduction, drug-smuggling . . . quite a nice little bill. Yes, Robert, I think you have been wise to choose the desert. A bit hot, perhaps, but not so sultry as Dartmoor in August. May I smoke?"

"You can do what you damn well please. It won't be for long."

"Pleasant. A threat, eh?"

"That's as you like to take it."

Basil Gault rose from his seat upon the stool and took from his pocket his cigarette-case. Selecting a Nestor, he struck a match. Then wheeled sharply upon the unprepared man in the doorway.

Straight and true the right shot out with that curious corkscrew turn of wrist that had gained Basil light-heavy-weight honours at Oxford. The big seal ring he was wearing cut deep into Hassan's cheek as the man staggered back. Basil jumped in again, but this time his blow glanced from the chin of the tottering Hassan and, carried by its impetus, Basil was hurled forward to fall a-top his enemy in the mouth of the archway. And as he fell he knew that for the second time since he had left his hotel a short, sharp fight had come to its conclusion.

Wiry arms twisted themselves through his. He felt the cruel pressure of a knee in the small of his back. Sinuous fingers about his throat. Strands of cord about his limbs. Then, trussed and helpless, he lay there beneath the arch, glaring impotently at his captors. He heard Hassan laugh.

"That will do, Maspar, I think. I did not think that I would need you."

He leant over until his eyes glittered evilly but a foot away from Basil's. There was nothing now of the man whom Basil had known in London. Truly, at that moment, Robert Hassan was all East.

"You fool!" he hissed. "I might have been merciful just for old times' sake. I would have set you free to go back to England when I'd got the Memphis treasure. Now you'll lie here and rot till the devil sends for you. To hell with your Scotland Yard and your drivel about murder! You'll lie here till you die, Basil Gault, and I'll see to it that you don't die *too* soon. . . ."

Basil smiled though half-closed eyelids. "What a pleasant chap you are, Robert! I wonder what our friends in Chelsea would say if they could see you."

The other leant closer so that Basil could feel the breath upon his cheek. Hassan's voice was but a hissing whisper:

"Not *too* soon. D'you hear that, Basil? I want you to last long enough to hear of our success before you go over. The Stones of Khor. What fools you English pigs are to meddle in the things of Old Egypt! Riches, Basil, beyond the dreams of emperors. Remember me telling you about all this one night in Oxford? Out there in the sun I'll build my palaces, out there I'll lead my life with . . . you understand?"

Basil's heart grew chill within him. Yes, he understood. There came to him a vision of Barbara Manton as he had last seen her, standing in the fog at Vera Peacock's door as he had driven away. And as upon that night the vision had faded from him, leaving him in the mist, so now it faded from his mental vision, leaving him to black despair. He turned his head and looked full into Hassan's eyes.

"Ah, that chills the humour in you, eh, Basil? Why don't you laugh and jeer and say I'm a pleasant fellow? Why don't you wonder what the Chelsea people would say to that? Oh, I'll go back to Chelsea all right when things have blown over! By that time your bones will be bleaching on the mud of the Nile. They'll ask about you, very likely. What shall I tell them, Basil?"

The man regarded his victim for a moment, the thin lips smiling.

"She's quite happy, Basil. Quite safe. I'm going out into the East, but I'm taking a fair jewel out of the West to share my exile. She will remind me of the old days. A souvenir of the Savoyard and the dear old Chelsea studios. Love blooms in the desert, Basil . . . away from your cursed fogs. Maspar!"

The Arab, who had been standing in the shadow of the doorway and in whom Basil recognised his old friend Ibrahim, came forward. The light from the lamp showed his hawk-like features, the cold cruelty of his eyes. At a sign from his master he bent down and pulled aside the rugs upon which Basil had been lying. Hooking his finger in an iron ring, he lifted as though it had been a feather-weight a large slab of the stone flooring. From below there came to Basil's ears the muted swirl of water, and he remembered the damp odour which had come to him upon regaining consciousness.

"Get up, Basil!" Robert Hassan touched lightly with the toe of his riding-boot the recumbent figure, and Basil shrank at the indignity. He would have refused to stir, but a movement upon the part of Maspar brought better counsels. Also he was mindful of the girl who waited behind the screen. He rose to his feet, and so far as his bonds allowed him, followed Hassan to the edge of the gaping hole in the floor.

"The main sewer of Cairo, Basil. Can't you find something deliciously humorous to say about that? It's a road that more than one man has taken in my father's time." Again that expressive shrug of shoulders. "So simple, Basil. The sewers of Cairo carry many secrets down to the Nile. The body of an unknown Englishman is found on the mud flats . . . that's all. Come, Maspar."

The Arab let fall the stone slab with a sound that awoke weird echoes. Then, without another word, the two men walked towards the door. They stood just within the archway in talk. Basil himself was plainly the subject of the greater part of their conversation, for they looked often in his direction, but as they spoke in Arabic he was not able to understand. He had sunk down upon the heaped-up rugs gazing with fascinated eyes at the slab beneath which swirled the sewer of Cairo. The odour of vaults and dead things was in his nostrils . . . the refuse of a great city and its secrets being carried down to the healing waters of the Nile. . . .

" Monsieur . . ."

Basil came out of his abstraction and turned. The men had gone and Zelie was kneeling beside him. In her hand she held the knife with which she had cut the loaf. Already she was busy with the strands of the bonds which held his arms. In her eyes there shone a happiness to which, Basil told himself, they had been a stranger for many a long day.

The bonds fell away and Basil rose to his feet. With a shudder he could not repress, he threw the rugs over the slab of stone.

" Why are you doing this for me, Zelie ? "

" Did you not say, monsieur, that we were to be friends ? "

" Friends ? . . . Yes, Zelie."

" And you asked for my story ? "

" Yes."

She looked into his eyes. " That story, monsieur, has now another ending."

" You are speaking in riddles, Zelie."

Quickly, in little hurried whispers, the dancing girl told Basil Gault the story of Robert Hassan's coming to El Bahar two years since, of his love-making, and of the manner of her father's death. Her mother, they told her, had died also, and, alone in the world and with all hope dead within her, the girl had done Hassan's bidding and come to Cairo. Since then she had not cared, had become accustomed to her life and had had no thought of a better. The girl told her story simply and without shame; told it with that sense of fatalism that is to be met with everywhere in the East.

Nearing the end, she pointed her slender hand towards the door. "Over there, monsieur. They talked in Arabic, and I heard them. They lied to me when they told me that my mother was dead. They talked of her there over by the door, talked of her as though she were alive. My mother, monsieur, whom I thought dead . . . alive by the grace of Allah! She is out there over the sand at El Bahar."

Basil laid a hand upon the girl's arm. "And you wish to go to your mother, Zelie? Tell me, are you kept prisoner here?"

The girl shook her head. "For the first year I was not allowed beyond the door. Then when they saw that I did not show any wish to run away, I did errands for the servants and for the other dancing-girls. Lately I am allowed to go and come much as I please."

"And you know Cairo?"

"A little, monsieur. Here we are in the Boulak, down near the Nile; but I know the Sharia Kamel and the Ezbakiyeh and the . . ."

"Then quick, Zelie! Bring me a sheet of paper and a pencil. Quickly!"

Impatiently Basil waited while the girl had gone from the room. What if Hassan suspected that his conversation had been overheard? What if Zelie, with years of abject slavery behind her, should play him false and go running with her tale to her master? What if . . . But he put such forebodings from him. The future, the immediate future, was bright. With the aid of this new-found little friend he would make his way out of this hell-hole with its dark passages and its doors into sewers. He would cheat old Nile of at least one victim.

The knowledge that Barbara was in fact in the hands of Robert Hassan was bitter knowledge, but it was certain knowledge, and as such not without its value. No longer would he have to rely upon conjecture. Barbara, beyond all doubt, was at El Bahar; whether he would get free of his present difficulties in time to deliver her was on the knees of the gods. And the knees of the gods, Basil was well aware, are slippery places.

He leant back upon his rugs and dreamed. When Barbara should be safe it would be a race between Hassan and himself for the Memphis treasure. He grew hot with anger to think that the Stone was in the hands of his enemy, and with the thought came the remembrance of what Vera Peacock had told him —that Barbara had been wearing the counterpart of the grey-green ornament at the Albert Hall. She had still been wearing it when she returned to Hampstead upon that night, the night of her disappearance. The inference was fairly obvious. If Hassan had indeed had hand in the death of his father, then not one Stone only but two were in the Egyptian's hands . . . and then his dreaming passed into reality as he heard the slither of Zelie's returning slippers in the passage.

Kneeling upon the floor and using the stool as a table, Basil wrote. For five minutes he wrote; then, folding the paper, he handed it to the waiting girl.

"You know the Eden Palace in the Midan-el-Khaznedar?"

" I can find it, monsieur."

" Ask for Mr. Bertie Traverson—the name's there on the note. Don't part with it. If he is not there, wait till he returns. Understand ? "

" Perfectly. But I must be back here at the Green Figs. The dancing begins at ten."

" In that case leave it with the head clerk in the office. Tell him it's Government business and very important. Good luck to you, little Zelie ! "

Mr. Bertie Traverson was seated in the lounge of the Eden Palace Hotel when Basil's messenger sent in word to him. He had spent the time of inactivity awaiting the reports of his agents in dining with Vera Peacock, and that lady had but a few minutes previously left him to write letters in the drawing-room. In half an hour he must make his way to his office in the Sharia-el-Mahdi for a conference with the subordinates upon whom had devolved the task of making enquiries as to the disappearance of Basil Gault. That half-hour he was spending in the most excellent company of a Laranaga and his dreams.

And, curiously enough, those dreams had, since his meeting with the gay little person from Chelsea, undergone somewhat of a change. The cosy suite of bachelor apartments in Half Moon Street that had seemed so eminently desirable to him were for the moment out of favour, and Bertie Traverson's imagination was veering slowly but no less surely towards a tiny bijou villa, perhaps on one of the upper reaches of the Thames, a little place that had lawns terracing down to the water's edge, and French windows, and striped sun-blinds—a charming setting for . . . And then Bertie Traverson would waft himself off upon the magic carpet of sentiment until the coming of the hotel servant had brought him rudely back to earth and to realities.

"A messenger, sir. The business, she says, is important."

Traverson looked up. He cast an eye of apprehension also in the direction of the drawing-room.

"She? . . . Then it's a lady?"

"A native, sir."

"Any message?"

"No, sir. She has a note, but she would not entrust it to me."

Traverson threw away the stub of his cigar and rose. "I'll see the lady. Where is she?"

"Out on the terrace, sir."

The waiter bowed, and preceded Traverson through the hall and out on to the terrace. There, standing in the shadow of a large flowering shrub, was the slender, elfin figure of an Arab girl. Sweet and piquant she was with the light from the long windows shining upon her hair and upon the rounded oval of her face. She had wrapped about her willowy form a native mantle which showed to perfection the sinuous curves of her little body.

Traverson walked towards her. "You wanted to speak to me? I am Mr. Traverson."

The girl nodded her head. "I am from Monsieur Gault . . . This is for you." Zelie handed over the letter as she spoke.

Traverson repressed the start of surprise he felt at the mention of his friend's name. He tore open the folded paper, and, walking back to where the light of the terrace was brighter, read :

" DEAR T.,

" What you told me about things working together in Egypt seems to be about right. The girl who brings you this letter is our friend, and I want you to look after her and see that she comes to no harm. She is in with a pretty tough crowd here in Cairo, and it will be a quick finish for her if she is found to be helping me. I'm a prisoner at some detestable joint called the Green Figs, a dancing-hall, I take it, somewhere in the Boulak section of the city. I haven't any further details as to locality, except that I'm situated precisely and perilously above the main sewer of Cairo. Pleasant, isn't it ? There is a trap-door down into this Elysian stream which looks uncommonly like proving to be the Styx for yours truly if you don't hurry up. Friend Hassan has been to see me. Not a very cheerful visitor, and his remarks about missing Englishmen were in rotten taste. Zelie will show you the precise location of the iniquitous spot, which for the moment harbours

" Your friend,

" B."

Traverson returned to where the girl was waiting. He laid a hand upon her shoulder and wheeled her round so that the light that came from the terrace might shine upon her. For a full minute he looked into the dark depths of the black eyes. Then he nodded.

" You have seen Monsieur Gault lately ? "

" But an hour since."

" And why have you been unfaithful to your master, Robert Hassan ? "

A hunted look came into Zelie's eyes. " Monsieur Gault will explain better than I. It is a long story. You will come with me ? "

" At once."

Bertie Traverson walked quickly up the steps and into the hotel. He took the lift to his room, slipped an automatic into the pocket of the light overcoat he threw on, and a few moments later rejoined Zelie in the gardens. Together they crossed the lawn, showing for a moment in the light that streamed from the drawing-room windows, and then on to the dark shrubbery and so out of sight of the hotel.

And a woman who had been writing at one of the little tables drawn close up to the window watched them with a curious feeling of cold about her heart. As Bertie Traverson had dreamed, so had Vera Peacock dreamed. And he had told her that business connected with the disappearance of Basil Gault would call him away to the Sharia-el-Mahdi immediately after dinner. And now . . .

The tiny breeze stirred languidly the long lace curtains. To Vera's ears came the elusive murmur of Cairo, to her nostrils the heavy scents of the gardens. She looked with brooding eyes at the dark shrubbery above which in the indigo of the sky the stars were burning like altar-lamps . . . the shrubbery that had swallowed up that little doll-like girl and the man she . . .

CHAPTER VII

MASPAR of the hawk eye, peering over the top of the gaudy curtain that separated his managerial sanctum from the main room of the Café of the Green Figs, rubbed the knuckles of one bony hand in the palm of the other, and blessed Allah for the tourists that came, at the plausible, deftly-worded suggestions of his trusted touts, to swell the coffers of his lord Hassan, and incidentally to line the pockets of his own good self.

A sordid enough place this Café of the Green Figs, and one that had attracted to itself times without number the attention of the police of Cairo. But Maspar was a man of exceeding cunning and truly Eastern wiles. Be the complaint what it might there was always a ready answer from the smiling lips of the Arab. Monsieur had lost his purse . . . unfortunate, very, but was monsieur sure that he had it with him when he came to the Green Figs. Batouch was an excellent guide, none more excellent in Cairo, and honest as the day. . . . Madame had been scandalised by the dancing of some of the girls. Amazing! Maspar would throw out his hands and say that his orders on such matters were explicit, but that the East was not as the West. And Maspar would wink solemnly at the officer of the law and slip a few piastres into his hand. And so, unmolested, the Green Figs bloomed to the profit of Robert Hassan and to the entertainment of the tourist.

A glimpse of the hidden East, the touts who hung about the hotels and the railway stations whispered insinuatingly to their intended victims, and truly by its very squalor the dive appealed to those who, coming from the glare of civilisation, hungered for a peep at what they fondly considered to be the underground world of old Egypt.

A big, bare room with tawdry hangings lit dimly by Moorish lamps and with a crude fresco of intertwined fig leaves singularly at variance with the sham meshrebiyeh and mosaic work on walls and floors. Red painted tables littered with glasses about which clustered a cosmopolitan crowd of which English and American formed the greater part. At the far end of the room, seen dimly through a haze of cigarette smoke, a raised dais upon which a dark-skinned girl swayed to the music of a native orchestra in the sinuous gyrations of an Arab dance.

Maspar watched for a moment the movements of the dancer, a new importation from a dancing hall in El Hilmiyar, then turned to take stock with shrewdly calculating eye of the evening's patrons of the Green Figs. The small group of Frenchmen by the far curtain were hardly, from a financial standpoint, worthy of consideration, a little cheap red wine, a little banter with the dancing girls would be the sum total of their night's dissipation. The stout American woman with her bored Arab guide would soon tire of the entertainment of the Green Figs, and retire to her hotel to write long letters home to the folk in Kansas City telling of her incursions into the mystic life of the East and of how she had been just tickled to death at it all.

The three Englishmen, however, those whom the estimable Zelie was so ably entertaining at their table drawn up close to the dais, that was another matter. A very good girl, Zelie, and one who brought much golden grist to the mill of the Green Figs. Zelie should be given a few extra piastres for this night's work did but the fool Englishmen prove fruitful.

The girl had perched herself upon the corner of one of the scarlet tables, one shapely leg swinging to and fro beneath the short dancing skirt of spangled silk. Her kohl-darkened eyes were full of laughter as she chatted with the Englishmen. The smoke from the cigarette held daintily between her jewelled fingers spiralled up into the heavy air and, through it, Maspar, from over his curtain, beamed benign approval. In a very little while now Zelie should be giving him the sign that her part of the work was done, and that the pigeons were ready for the plucking. And even as he thought of the sign the sign was made.

Zelie threw a quick glance towards the curtained sanctum and, bending, pretended to adjust the tiny Moorish slipper on her left foot. The eyes of Maspar beamed their understanding. The three Englishmen were ready for the suggesting of further delights, of further entertainment provided only for the more favoured patrons of the Green Figs, or in other words, those with the longest purses.

Maspar rose slowly from his chair behind the curtain and walked towards the table. He bowed ingratiatingly. He accepted the Englishmen's invitation that he should take coffee with them. And after one cigarette had been smoked he turned to the eldest of the three and slowly allowed the lid of one eye to droop.

" Perhaps the gentlemen would like to see the dancing upstairs ? " The leer in the hawk eyes admitted of no misreading.

The man addressed raised dull eyes from his wine glass. Maspar went on. Really, this was going to be surprisingly easy.

" For the tourists." He threw out his hand and embraced contemptuously the room in which they were seated. " But for the milor we have something better, much better. A dancer, my gentlemen, from El Manar," the man leant forward and whispered. " Dark as the night upon the Nile, my gentlemen, and eyes like the stars of the desert."

Zelie had slipped down from her scarlet perch as her master had been speaking and was leaning back against the dais. Now she thrust her little head forward with a gesture of impudent invitation. There was anxiety, fear almost, in the eyes that showed so dark against the rice whiteness of her face.

" If the gentlemen will permit . . . two English sovereigns," she said.

The dull-eyed victim flashed a look at the girl, a look that for one fleeting instant was no longer dull. Then he turned to his companions.

" Worth a couple of quid . . . eh ? "

The others grinned somewhat sheepishly. Your

Englishman abroad wishes to miss nothing, but he is, perhaps, just a little shy. The three rose awkwardly, one of them stumbling forward against the table as he swayed to his feet. The man who had been addressed by Maspar took his wallet from his pocket, selected two notes and pressed them into the itching palm. A moment later they were standing with Zelie upon the further side of the shabby silken curtain that draped the side of the dais.

The Arab, smiling, returned to his little office to go through the accounts of the evening's takings. His part of the affair was finished. Zelie would now take the matter in hand and see to the fleecing of the fool Englishmen. A good girl, Zelie, a very good girl.

Zelie meanwhile led the way along an ill-lighted corridor, the three befuddled patrons of the Green Figs following her slithering slipper steps as best they might upon the uneven flagging. A lamp standing some twenty yards down the passage gave what little light there was, and threw monstrous shadows upon the low-pitched roof. On reaching the spot where this lamp stood the passage opened out into a square room, and it was in this square room with the length of the corridor separating them from the main salon of the Green Figs, that the three befuddled Englishmen were suddenly befuddled no longer.

A signal from the leader and they brought each from his hip pocket an automatic of a serviceable calibre. Bertie Traverson, inserting the monocle from which circumstances had demanded his temporary separation, was speaking quietly but rapidly.

"You did that top-hole, Zelie . . . lead on, there's a good girl. Bolt that door, Havers, and stand guard there. Give anyone who wants to follow us a shot if it's necessary, to keep him quiet, and then follow us up. You, Davis, come with me! . . . Now, Zelie . . . Gad, you fellows, what vile stuff they do give you out there!"

Havers turned from his bolting the door. The automatic was held ready in his hand.

"Looks like killing quite a covey with one stone, chief. Fancy the Green Figs being run by our old friend Hassan!"

Traverson smiled grimly.

"I fancy friend Hassan is for it this time . . . Ready, Zelie? Keep an eye open, Havers!"

Zelie had raised a curtain from a doorway in the far wall and Traverson and the man he had called Davis followed her as she disappeared into the mouth of another narrow passage. The programme which Maspar had arranged for their entertainment and for which they had paid two good English pounds, was suffering a change. There might be a dancer from El Manar who might have eyes like the stars upon the desert, or there might not. The new programme that had been arranged in Bertie Traverson's office in the Sharia-el-Mahdi was more to the liking of the three Englishmen than dancers from El Manar. Moreover that programme was working without a hitch, thanks to the excellent co-operation of Mademoiselle Zelie. As Maspar had said, Zelie was a good girl, a very good girl.

The Nubian who had been posted as guard over the entrance to the passage leading to the chamber where Basil Gault was confined was sleeping well and soundly, the coffee with which Zelie had so thoughtfully provided him earlier in the evening half drunk in the cup by his side. He had been about to visit the kitchen to complain of the curious taste of the beverage when sleep had overtaken him. The little lamp upon the stone floor threw its light upon the black features, the half-closed eyes, the gaping mouth. Traverson leaned forward and raised the lids from the fish-like eyes. No need to bind a man whom earthquakes would be powerless to awaken for at least five hours.

"Much further, Zelie . . . does Monsieur Gault . . .?"

Bertie Traverson's words were cut short by the sound of a shot muffled by the low pitch of the corridor roof. Another moment and a voice which, like the shot, came muffled to the listeners.

"Traverson . . . Davis . . .!"

Bertie Traverson wheeled round.

"Here, Havers. Straight on!"

The man burst out upon them from the blackness of the passage opening. His face showed white in the lamplight and the automatic he held in his hand still smoked slightly.

"Maspar . . ." he whispered.

Traverson had him by the arm.

"Shot?"

Havers nodded, and a smile of sorts creased the pale lips.

"Dead as mutton. Came tapping at the door. Smelt a rat, I should say, and came after us to see that all was as it should be. I stood it as long as I could, then I heard him calling for someone to come and help him to beat in the door. That settled it. He was screaming like a frightened woman and had the wind up badly. So I opened the door before any assistance could come to him and . . . well, I shot the swine."

"Good egg. Anyone else come along?"

Havers shook his head. I don't think so. "I don't think anyone heard him when he called the first time, and I didn't give him time for a second attempt. Hurry, Traverson, we must get out of here. The whole joint will be about our ears in no time?"

Havers turned to the girl and Traverson signed for her to lead on. The work that had brought them to the Green Figs must not suffer because a pestilent Arab lay dead behind them. Besides, Masper, until his body should be found, was far safer dead than alive. There could be no thought of turning back with their task unfinished. They plunged into the passage after Zelie.

Basil Gault was roused from an uneasy slumber in which he had been dreaming of Cairene sewers and dark-eyed Zelies to find Traverson bending over him. He was holding a flask to his lips and was telling him to shut up and get a move on. Explanations would come later and any thanks which Basil felt incumbent upon him to hand out could come after that. He felt himself helped to his feet, an automatic thrust into his hand and, with Zelie this time in the rear, the return journey was commenced. Safely the drugged Nubian was passed, without incident the corridors were traversed, and the little party came again to the room where Maspar lay.

Across the doorway he sprawled, his figure crumpled shapelessly as he had fallen. The thin lips drawn back from the discoloured teeth seemed to be wreathed in a dreadful smile as though in death Maspar had solved the riddle of life and had found the answer amusing. Traverson lifted a corner of the man's kaftan and covered from sight the leering features. Then, stepping across the body, he led the way back to the main room of the Green Figs.

Here, clearly, all was not as it should be. Whether or no the sound of Haver's automatic had reached the café Traverson could not tell, but the dancing had ceased and the native waiters were clustered with the dancing girls about the dais, talking in whispers and looking towards the curtain. The party of Frenchmen was breaking up, and the lady from Kansas City had already with her dragoman taken her departure. As Traverson's party entered the room a hush came over the whispering waiters and a stout little Arab who, by the importance of his manner was probably Maspar's second in command, came, or was thrust, forward. He hid his terror as well as might be behind an assumption of outraged dignity. His eyes widened as they fell upon the automatics.

" I do not understand . . . the waiters tell me that they heard a shot ! "

" The waiters are perfectly right."

The man threw out his hands before him. " But . . . again I do not understand . . . where is Maspar ? "

Traverson thrust the fat little man aside so that he fell backwards among the scarlet tables. A scream from one of the dancing women rang shrilly. What was to be done must be done quickly, and he had no wish for the Cairene police to have their attention drawn to the Café of the Green Figs until he and his were well away from that delectable rendezvous. Traverson turned fiercely upon the little man where he lay among the overturned tables.

"There'll be a few more shots, you little rat, if you don't clear a road for us. And send those men of yours about their business or they will be hearing shots at closer quarters. Hurry!"

One or two of the bolder spirits among the waiters seeing their chief assailed had assumed a semblance of courage, and made as though to bar Traverson's way. Havers seized a chair and sent it spinning among them, and followed it with a shot fired harmlessly into the air. And with the report the opposition crumbled, dancers, patrons, waiters, all scurrying to cover like rats into a drain. Traverson's laugh rang out.

"Come on, boys . . . the door over there!"

Havers seized Zelie round the waist and half carried, half led the white-faced girl to the door. A moment later they were in the open air, open as the air could be in a narrow alley-way where the houses all but met overhead. Stumbling in the darkness they turned to where, a hundred yards away, showed the lights of the Sharia Bulak. And as they started to run, the door of the Green Figs which had been pulled shut behind them opened for a moment, and a shaft of orange light stabbed the darkness. There was a little cry as of a wounded animal . . . it sobbed plaintively through the narrow street. . . .

Traverson turned and peered back into the gloom.

"Anyone hurt?"

Havers' voice answered him. The voice came from a little huddled group of dark shapes.

" Yes . . . it's Zelie. The brutes have stabbed her."

Traverson ran back, whipping from his pocket a flash-lamp. He turned the light on to the girl where she lay upon the rough cobbles, her lips scarlet against the dead white of her face. The eyes were closed and the smooth brow puckered with pain and one of her little hands clawed at her shawl where a thin ribbon of blood showed red against the flowered silk and spangles. Davis was kneeling beside her feeling with experienced fingers for the extent of her hurt. He looked up at Traverson and nodded.

" Only slight, I think. We'll carry her. There's sure to be a cab prowling along the Boulak. They don't ask many questions in this quarter. Take her feet, Havers . . . carefully. God, what a shame!"

The girl had fainted and the task of the bearers was an easy one. Moving as quickly as their burden would allow, the party made its way along the alley to the Sharia Bulak. It was while they were waiting for a conveyance to make its appearance that Traverson noticed that Basil was not with them. Turning quickly he ran the hundred yards down the alley to the door of the Green Figs.

" Thought so, Basil. Why can't you let well alone? No wonder they call us English mad!"

He placed a strong arm about Basil's waist and dragged him by force from the door upon which he was beating with his knuckles.

" Let up, Traverson. They stabbed . . ."

"Yes, old thing, I know they stabbed her. But that's no reason why they should stab you, too. You're weak as a rat, anyway. Besides, I'm in command of this little show and I don't want the police butting in. At least, not yet. Zelie's not much hurt!"

Basil capitulated. After all, Traverson was right. There was nothing to be gained by heroics. He suffered himself to be led up to the Sharia Bulak where they found Davis and Havers already placing Zelie tenderly upon the cushions of a fiacre. Davis had been right when he had said that they do not ask many questions in the Bulak district. The red-fezzed scoundrel who rattled his *arabeah* across the cobbles thought but little of a party of Englishmen who cared enough for one of the dancing sluts of the Green Figs to abduct her forcibly to join in their evening's revel. It was only when Davis leant forward and altered the direction he had first given and ordered the man to drive quickly to the Gizhirez Hospital, that he had dimly perceived that all was not as it should be. But the solace of thoughts not unconnected with unusual fares for unusual journeys stifled any inquisitiveness that he might feel, and whipping up his white Arabs he went on his way.

At the hospital Zelie was left in the care of the night surgeon, Davis and Havers remaining in the waiting-room for the result of his examination. Traverson and Gault walked slowly towards the Continental.

"And now, my dear Basil, having stirred up a peck of trouble in the little old Figs, we'll leave our fat friend to account for the body of the excellent Maspar as best he can. I expect he'll slip him down the sewer that was to be your short cut to heaven. I don't think he's any too anxious to have the police nosing about the place, anyway. Neither is Hassan. I'm glad I found you in time beating on that door, or else Maspar might have had a companion."

Basil nodded absently. He was thinking of the girl who had taken so great a risk for him and of the vengeance that she had brought down upon herself. He had been sorry when Traverson had vetoed his remaining at the hospital. Better to leave it to Davis and Havers, both of whom were well known to the house surgeon, and who were well enough versed in the ways of Cairo to tell that gentleman just as much or as little as they should think fit. Moreover, Traverson, wise in his judgment of men, had seen that Basil had undergone about as much as a man may undergo. Supper and a night between the sheets of a good bed would work wonders . . . and the immediate objective should be a whisky-and-soda in the smoking-room of the Continental.

Bertie Traverson raised the tumbler to his lips.

"All square with friend Hassan," he said and drank. He replaced his glass upon the table and lit a cigarette. "Now, Basil, you can tell me what you know."

The other laughed. "Not much more than I told you in my letter. That pleasant little underground journey to the Nile has rather taken up my thoughts. I'm not a nervous man, Traverson, but honestly that damned sewer got on what stock of nerves I possess. Did Zelie tell you much?"

"About Miss Manton?"

"Yes. And other things."

" She said that Miss Manton was at El Bahar. That was clear from what she heard our defunct friend Maspar telling Hassan. We're drawing near to the end of the hunt. A good night's rest and we'll be on our way to the oasis. No, we can't start now, at any rate. There's no train, and I don't want to hamper myself with a mad Englishman who is badly in want of a sleep."

" Don't rot."

" I'm not rotting. Besides we have got to wait for Davis and Havers to hear how our little friend is. Also they are coming with us. Pretty handy men in a scrap, Davis and Havers." He paused for a moment and blew a ring of cigarette smoke. " Things do work together in Old Egypt, don't they, Basil ? "

" Meaning just what ? "

" Only that I've stumbled upon what has taken me months if not years of hard work. I mean the Green Figs. We've had our eye on the place for many a day, but I hadn't an earthly that Robert Hassan was mixed up with the joint. I fancy you would not have been the first to take the sewer road to the Nile. I think what we have learnt to-night is going to clear up quite a little crop of mysteries."

" And Hassan, where is he now ? "

Traverson leant forward.

" That's just what we've got to find out. Where the Stones of Khor are there will be our friend Hassan. There or thereabouts. It's known, or rather the surmise amounts to certainty, that he had a hand in the murder of your father, and that one of the Stones came into his possession that night. We also know that he got the other from a fool Englishman who *would* carry it about with him in the streets of Cairo . . . "

" I said don't rot, Traverson. He'd have got it any way! "

" Sorry and all that, but perhaps you're right. You merely hurried on the action and I suppose we've got to be thankful for that. But, as I was saying, our friend will be getting busy on the great game as soon as he deems it safe. In other words, Hassan will be well on the way to the spot where the old priest-kings of Memphis buried their surplus. Whether he takes in El Bahar *en route* I can't say. We will, any way. Miss Manton first, and the Memphis treasure afterwards, eh ? "

" If only we were starting to-night ! "

" Nothing doing. First and foremost the initial stage of our romantic quest must be by the prosaic train. Rotten things trains and wireless and aeroplanes ; they've knocked all the romance out of adventure. I've always been keen to be shipwrecked on a desert island. I can never do it now, but that's by the way. The last train for Fassiut left hours ago. The first leaves Helouan Station at nine. Meanwhile it's a little light supper for you, my lad, and then to bed. I'll sit here and wait for Havers and Davis and map out some sort of programme with them. I don't fancy Zelie's much hurt. If the report should be bad I promise I'll wake you. Now off you go! "

Basil rose to his feet.

" It's damned hard lines, Traverson, being packed off to bed like a kid. There's Barbara out there in the power of that brute whom I'm going to strangle with my own hands if God's good to me . . . and here's me drinking whisky-and-soda and thinking of a light supper and being sent off to bed by Nurse Traverson. I . . . I'm damned if I go!"

"You'll be damned if you don't . . . Steady on, Basil . . . !"

For in making as though to resume his seat Basil had swayed on his feet. The room suddenly tilted to his vision. He caught at the chair-back to steady himself. Then smiled wanly and held out a hand to his friend.

"Sorry, Traverson. You're quite right. You always are. Good-night."

He turned and walked slowly towards the door. Half-way across the room he turned.

"Promise, Traverson . . . about Zelie, I mean."

"I promise, old chap. Good-night."

"Good-night . . . nurse."

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CHAPTER VIII

Apr/61

MOONLESS, starless night lay upon the desert. A hot airless wind moaning across the wastes of sand sent little showers of grit particles into the eyes and nostrils of a single horseman who rode slowly towards the oasis El Bahar. It was not by choice that Robert Hassan rode leisurely, but the journey from Fassiut had been taken at speed and his Arab was all but spent. And however a brute such a man might be to his fellow men, the Arab blood in Robert Hassan forbade his carrying that brutality as far as his horse. Besides, surely there was no thought of pursuit.

If his haunt of evil set in the very heart of Cairo had escaped the attention of the authorities for so long, it was hardly upon the cards that Fate should choose this moment to interfere in the affairs of Robert Hassan. Ever since the time when his father had brought his French wife to Egypt the Green Figs had flourished, hiding its guilty secrets and flaunting its cheap vices beneath the very noses of the Cairene police. Many a good man who knew too much, or who owned too fat a purse, had gone the way which, by the grace of Allah, Mr. Basil Gault should take when Maspar should deem the time expedient.

Hassan's lips curled into a smile as he thought of Basil lying bound and helpless at his feet. He called to mind the night at the Savoyard and the contrast appealed to him. But a few weeks ago and Gault, proud in his possession of Barbara Manton, was regarding him with ill-concealed resentment as the car felt its way through the fog of the Embankment. . . . It was different now. Basil now was lying bound and helpless counting the hours that remained to him before he should be sent upon that hideous journey of death. Barbara Manton waiting at El Bahar for . . . his return. Certain regrets came to the man that no more would the gates of the West be opened to him, regrets that he had burnt his boats in that direction. The lights of Piccadilly, the Row on an early spring morning, his flat in St. James' Street, all the little pictures of the great Metropolis came tantalisingly before him. But he brushed them aside.

Was not the East his own ? Was there no pleasure in the vast desert, the sun-kissed Nile ? Was there not waiting for him in El Bahar one of the fairest jewels out of the West ? Did not one of the Stones of Khor rest that very moment in his pocket, and did not its brother lie securely hidden in his room in El Bahar ? And did not Basil Gault, his arch enemy, vowing vengeance for his father and for the wrong done to Barbara, lie in the cellar of the Green Figs in Cairo . . . next to be discovered as a corpse on the mud flats of the Nile ? Would not his father in Paradise glorify Allah in that his son had so worthily carried out his trust ? Yes, the fates had been very kind to Robert Hassan, and if the price he must pay for his fortune meant that he must forego the pleasures of the West . . . so be it. He was well content.

Barbara might prove difficult. Perhaps very difficult.

But all the more sport in the taming. The ripest fruit always hung beyond reach, and who would give a fig for a horse that ate out of one's hand like a rabbit? Barbara was adorable when she was angry. Pictures of the girl upon the night when he had dined with her in the little room overlooking the desert came back to him and he smiled at the remembrance. He would not be so gentle next time. Women were made to be mastered. . . .

And with these pleasant thoughts for company, the lord of El Bahar rode up to the gates of his house and knocked with the stock of his riding-whip upon the panels. He threw the reins to the Arab who answered his summons and made his way to his room. He gave himself no time even to change his travel-stained clothes, but crossed to the corner table in his sanctum and mixed himself a truly Western drink. Then locking the door behind him he took from its hiding-place the grey-green stone that had been in his possession since that night of the Arts Club Ball.

From an inner pocket of his jacket he took its brother-stone, the one that he had taken from Basil Gault when his emissaries had brought him stunned and senseless to the café in the Sharia Bulak. Together he laid them upon the table beneath the light of the Moorish lamp, joined for the first time since the priest-kings of Memphis had confided to their keeping the treasures of their temples.

And it was as though Robert Hassan gazed into the heart of a crystal, a mystic mirror that had the power to show him pictures even as the sand of El Kabar showed pictures for those who had the wit to read their message. It was as though some strange power emanated from the grey discs.

About them there seemed to the eyes of Robert Hassan to grow a nimbus, a haze, opal and grey as the mists that show upon the surface of the Nile at dawn. And in the heart of the mist, seen darkly as through a dimmed mirror, the interior of a room, a room in which were cases containing mummies, a room cut into mosaics by green moonlight and shadows. A figure lying dead, a figure that changed as Hassan watched it to that of a shapeless form lying upon the sands of the desert.

Again, as one film picture dissolves and becomes another, the figure changed. Now it was that of a woman beautiful as the night, lying, a dagger thrust into her breast, gazing up with her dead eyes into a sky of stars . . . around her great terraces, as though of a palace garden. And when she, too, had passed into the mists, there came the figure of a young man lying bound in a Cairene cellar. . . . Robert Hassan with an oath, passed a hand before his eyes and shook himself free from his fancies. These were pictures of ages long dead, of tragedies, little cameos from the trail of blood left by those who, through the centuries, had sought the Stones of Khor.

That man lying upon the desert. Some trader, perhaps, enticed by robbers into the wilds. . . . The girl with the dagger. A priestess, a courtesan. . . . But Robert Hassan shrugged his shoulder. No time, this, for the reading of pictures. The present and the future must take precedence of the past. He took from a shelf a book of heiroglyphics, a magnifying glass, and a large scale map of upper Egypt. For nearly an hour he bent over the Stones, so intent upon his researches that Ali was forced to knock many times before his master opened the door. The Arab bowed low as he entered and closed the door behind him.

" I heard you ride up, and I have been waiting," he began; then his eyes fell from his master's face to the table. He bent his head almost in adoration.

" The Stones . . ."

Hassan laughed. " The Stones of Khor, Ali. The Stones of Khor back from their two thousand years' wandering. Are not they like bride and bridegroom united after many days? I am the first, you the second to see their wedding. My birthright, Ali, the birthright of the Hassans and delivered into the keeping of a Hassan."

" Allah is good."

Hassan cloaked the look that came into his eyes. London does much to wipe Allah from a man's soul. He bent his head gravely.

" Yes, Ali, Allah is good. Look over these notes I have made, will you, and tell me what you make of them. I'm not so well versed in the lore of old Egypt as you. Read me the riddle, Ali?"

And as the man took a seat before the table: " Miss Manton is safe . . . I mean she is well?"

" Quite."

" She has retired?"

" These two hours. It is late."

" Too late to disturb a lady, eh, Ali?"

" That is as Mr. Hassan considers fit."

Robert Hassan with a short laugh, laid a hand on his servant's shoulder.

"We've done with the 'Mr.' Ali. I've done with England and with English ways. We are Easterns, Ali, you and me. You, too, have done with England."

There was no answer, but looking back into the room as he passed out on to the balcony Hassan saw the turbaned head of Ali bent low over the Stones of Khor. He knew that he, at any rate, would bless Allah that he would be no more called upon to leave the land of his fathers for the fogs and rains of Albion.

The master of El Bahar leant his arms upon the painted rail of the balcony and thought of many things. The wind had increased while he had been engaged with the deciphering of the secret of the stones. It wailed now about the walls and minarets of the house, bending the boles of the palms and whispering its strange secrets among the foliage of the feathered tops. The spirits of the old gods were abroad he told himself, the gods of old Memphis turning in their sleep. Surely, of all the mysteries of Egypt, none was stranger than that which Ali was working out to its conclusion in the room behind him.

How wonderful was the desert in the darkness! More wonderful, perhaps, for its not being seen. It was as though Hassan looked out into the dim vista of the ages, a vista peopled with strange shapes of his imagination and vibrant with vague illusive murmurings. The visions that he had seen upon the grey-green faces of the Stones of Khor came again to him. . . . And again he shook his fancies from him.

The man took a few steps out from the shelter of the verandah and looked up at the darkened lattice behind which Barbara was sleeping. The light from the

Moorish lamp within his room played strange shadow tricks upon his face, a face that was as unreadable as the Sphinx that gazes for ever across the sands and across the centuries.

He was glad, in a measure, that he had not arrived in time to visit her. A night of rest and he would be able more efficiently to deal with the problem of Barbara Manton. It came upon him suddenly that the girl had ceased to be a pawn in the game that he was playing. Even the Stones for which he had bartered his very soul became of no account compared with the girl who lay sleeping now behind the lattice above him. He knew now why he had been so willing without a pang of regret to give up the West. It was because the West was symbolised in Barbara Manton, that with her East and West were one . . . Paradise. A sudden passion took him. He felt that he must go up to that room, must take the slender form of the girl in his arms, hold her to him and whisper to her of his love.

And with the passion there was a fear, a deadly fear that Barbara would sear him with her contempt as she had seared him upon the morning when he had ridden to Fassiut with Maspar. For a little while he must hold his hand. He asked himself whether he had not been foolish in bidding Maspar do as he had bidden. Far better, surely, had it been to hold Basil Gault as a hostage, a trump card to play when all else had failed.

And then the man's thoughts were broken into by a movement in the room above. A faint glow as from a lamp threw shadows across the ceiling. A figure appeared for a minute at the lattice, and, hidden himself by the angle of the verandah, Robert Hassan looked upon the face of Jebel. The woman remained motionless, her head bent in the attitude of listening. Then, raising it, she peered out into the darkness in the direction where the track led out to the old caravan road and Fassiut. Hassan, listening also, could hear nothing but the moaning of the wind and the little hiss of the sand particles that fell like rain on the verandah roof. Then Jebel faded back into the shadow of the room. A shiver as though a cold wind had blown across his heart came over Robert Hassan. With an oath he strode back into the room where Ali was still seated at the desk. The turbaned head was raised as his master entered.

" I was right in my calculations ? "

" Nearly. A few miles to the East would be more correct."

" But the location . . . that is clear ? "

"Quite. A day's journey, perhaps, or a day and a half."

" Through Fassiut ? "

Ali rose from his seat and pointed to the map. Hassan, bending, followed the trail laid down by the brown finger-tip. A little cry of triumph rose to his lips. Barbara Manton could wait. This treasure of emperors should be his first charge. In three days he could be back in El Bahar, with uncounted riches to lay at Barbara's little feet. It would make his victory assured. All women were the same . . . Besides, what had he to fear ? Basil would be dead by now. Maspar never strained a point where there was killing to be done. And no one but Basil Gault had any suspicions that Barbara was at El Bahar. He walked towards the door.

" A horse, Ali, to be saddled at dawn. I ride alone."

CHAPTER IX

To all Barbara's enquiries as to the trend of affairs Ali turned the deafest of deaf ears. When pressed he would tell her with a beatific smile that Allah had been good and that the cups of happiness of them all were full and overflowing with the waters of joy. If the measure of that happiness were not judged strictly by madame's Western standards, nevertheless they were undoubtedly the waters of joy. Madame must remember that the East is old and wise and that Allah knows best. Certain things, he told her vaguely, which had laid hidden in the bosoms of the gods for many centuries had, by the wisdom of his master and the will of the Prophet, to whom all praise, been lately brought to light, things which were working out their destinies and with them the destinies of those with whom they had been associated.

In such riddles would the man speak and dilate upon the wondrous future that stretched out illimitable as the sands of the Sahara. For him, Ali, a patch of land in the Fayum where he could live in peace and grow his cotton, and where the woman of his choice had been awaiting him these many moons.

And as the rascal had spoken of this dreamland of his desire, the snakelike glitter had left his eyes and they had become abodes of ineffable peace, slumbrous as an oasis pool at dawn.

"So much for your future, Ali," Barbara had said, "but what of mine?"

They were sitting upon the coping of the wall that "separates the desert from the sown." Always, since the departure of the master for Cairo, had Ali accompanied Jebel and herself upon their morning walks. Of the hurried visit of Robert Hassan to El Bahar Ali had spoken no word, but Barbara had sensed that something had happened, something that had brought a joyous excitement into Ali's eyes.

At first she had resented his unwelcome intrusion upon the privacy of Jebel and herself, but as the days passed she had come to see that the man was but acting under the instructions of his master, and, bearing in mind the game which she had set herself to play, she had accepted the inevitable, had come even to find a certain amusement in the man's quaint philosophy, his fatalism, his complete and utter disregard for either right or wrong.

Evil as had been his life in the service of Robert Hassan, and he spoke openly of his misdeeds with never a thought of conceit or regret, Ali considered them as nothing more than incidents, services that any servant would render at the bidding of any master. Without a single twinge of conscience he was looking forward complacently to an honourable old age among his cotton plants in the Fayum, and in the fulness of time an entry, unchallenged, into the eternal pleasauance which he had not the slightest doubt the Prophet had prepared for his faithful follower.

"What of my happiness, Ali?"

The man drew his eyes from the minaret where, against the topaz of the evening sky, two milk-white doves had been circling, coming out from his dreams into the reality of this wearisome world. He turned to the girl with a smile.

" Happiness," he said, " is like unto the harvest. If one gathers the grain when the ears are ripe his garner house is full and all is well." The man paused and threw out his thin brown hands. " But if one allows the season to pass, then the winds come up from the desert and lay waste. The locusts devour."

Barbara shrugged her shoulders. " But all harvests are not the same. I could no more be happy out in your Fayum than . . ."

" . . . Than I, madame, could be happy among your eternal fogs and rains. Allah be praised that my master's work in England is done and that we go no more to its shores."

The girl looked up sharply. " What's that you say, Ali ? You have said nothing of this before. Have you, then, heard from Mr. Hassan ? "

Ali dropped his eyes. He, the trusted of his lord, had been indiscreet. His visions of the future had dulled his perceptions of the present. Too soon had he anticipated the time when he might be free to use his tongue as he would. Too soon had he forgotten that that unruly member was still the property of his master. Barbara, watching him, saw the distress in his eyes and pressed her advantage.

" You do not answer, Ali ? "

" What can I say to madame ? "

" You can tell me whether Robert Hassan has been back to El Bahar since he left for Cairo. Jebel told me that she thought she heard noises—a horse and the voices of men in the night."

Ali hissed sharply between his teeth.

"Jebel . . . Jebel is the daughter of camels. May Allah . . . !"

"I wouldn't interfere in divine matters if I were you, Ali. Allah can get on very well without any help. And so your master is not returning to England?"

"I believe not, madame."

Barbara was silent. She sat upon the coping of the wall swinging one little foot in its white canvas shoe to and fro and watching a youth in a brown burnous leading a string of goats along the edge of the oasis. Then: "Is it that your master fears to return to England?" she asked.

"What, madame, should my master fear?"

The girl shook her head. "You answer all my questions with further questions. That, Ali, is the refuge of the liar who has not his lie quite ready. But never mind. I spoke generally only. Naturally I did not think that Mr. Hassan would mix himself up with any crime—murder for instance. You see, the penalties for murder are very heavy. They are heavy, too, for anyone who assists in the crime. Accessories they are called, Ali."

The man looked towards the village. Barbara saw that the skin of his face was slightly grey.

"I think, madame, that we should be returning," he said.

"The conversation not being quite to your taste, eh, Ali? Very well."

The man had risen from the wall and drawn his burnous about him. The peace in which he had been steeping his soul had departed from him, and into the black eyes there had crept, apart from the fear that was there, a sinister gleam. He shivered slightly.

" The air is cold, madame, we will speak no more of this matter. Maybe that certain deeds of my master have been misjudged by your government. I can say nothing as to that. I am but my master's servant. Also I know not the laws of England. East is East always, and the doings of the East may seem strange to Western eyes. Come, madame."

But Barbara remained seated. She was beginning to enjoy this little chat with Mr. Ali. To speak thus to Hassan might be dangerous, but in the hands of the servant she was safe. Ali would not dare do her any hurt during Hassan's absence from El Bahar. And so it pleased her to bait him further.

" Oh, it's early yet. And it's not a bit cold. Someone walking over your grave, Ali. Besides, you haven't answered my question about my happiness. You know, Ali, the cup which Allah has overfilled. You're not cross, are you ? No. Then smile. What of my cup of happiness if Robert Hassan does not go back to London ? You see, I like London just as you like the Fayum. I love its fogs."

" It pleases madame to make fun of her servant."

" It pleases madame, Ali, to ask how her servant thinks she is going to find her way back alone across all that sand. I'll speak to Mr. Hassan the moment he gets back. I'll tell him what you have said."

The man turned fiercely. His thin hand closed upon her little wrist like a vice.

" You would not dare . . . " He broke off suddenly as round the angle of the wall there raced an Arab youth mounted upon a pony. The beast had been ridden hard and the rider was covered from head to foot with the sand of the desert.

" Mahmoud . . . "

The youth wheeled his pony, brought it up upon its haunches. He slipped from the saddle and ran towards Ali.

" My lord Hassan," he stammered, and reeled upon his feet. He leant, half fainting, against the wall, his eyes closed, then sank shapelessly to the ground.

In a moment Barbara was upon her knees by his side. She slipped her hand beneath the ragged burnous feeling the lithe brown body for the beating of his heart.

" Water, Jebel, quickly."

A little while and the big eyes opened and rested upon her fair face, and a slow smile curved the parched lips. The boy would have spoken, but Ali pushed Barbara roughly aside and bent down over him.

" What of my lord Hassan ? "

Mahmoud half rose into a sitting posture. A slim brown hand pointed away across the desert towards the north.

" By the well near to Kabak. . . I lay there resting on my way back from the caravan road where I had been to sell dates to the travellers. They lay there smoking . . . did not see me . . . I speak little English, but I heard . . . "

" Speak quicker, Mahmoud. What did you hear ? "

" That the peace of my lord Hassan was threatened.

Two of them there, Ali, and waiting, I think, for more to join them from the barrack at Fassiut. Had there been but one I would have strangled him as he lay, but two . . . I did not dare."

Ali smiled grimly. He threw a glance towards where Barbara stood a few paces away with Jebel.

"You are a good lad, Mahmoud. My lord will reward. Saw you their faces?"

"No, the well was between us."

"Nor heard their names?"

The boy pushed the dirty fez from his forehead.

"Only one . . . Traverson."

"Traverson?"

The word came from between Ali's lips like the hiss of a serpent. Again he looked at Barbara and wondered whether any of their Arabic had conveyed a meaning to her. But the girl was leaning upon the coping of the wall looking out over the desert. Clearly she had understood nothing.

"Yes. Traverson. He seemed to be the leader. When I could hear no more, for the men fell silent or spoke only in an undertone, I crawled from where I had been crouching and found my pony and rode by way of El Shebel. To come direct would have meant crossing their line of sight."

Ali nodded and motioned the boy to say no more. He rose and threw back his shoulders. He who so lately had been dreaming of the lotus-eating days to come, was again the man of action, the slave of Robert Hassan. He turned and began to walk swiftly towards the village. Once he paused as though in thought, but seeing that Jebel and Barbara were following him, he went on his way and looked back no more. And as they threaded the narrow streets Barbara saw that now and again he would slacken his pace and pass a word with one or other of the men who lounged in the doorways of the houses, men who at that word crept away and were swallowed up by the shadows.

Reaching the house Ali turned into the passage-way leading to Robert Hassan's quarters, and Barbara, seemingly forgotten, crossed the courtyard and made her way up the stairs to her own room. And when Jebel had entered after her she slipped the big wooden bolt into place and ran to the window. Straining her eyes she looked towards the north.

" Over there was where he pointed, Jebel. What is over there ? "

" The caravan road, madame."

" The way to Fassiut ? "

" Yes, madame."

" What was it the boy said, Jebel ? "

" I did not dare get close enough to hear everything. Ali was watching me. But I gathered that there were men on their way to El Bahar, men who wished no good to its master."

" And, therefore, our friends. Did you hear nothing more ? "

" I think that they wait for men to come out from Fassiut to join them . . . perhaps to attack Robert Hassan here. One of the men was named Traverson . . . "

Barbara stiffened. Somewhere in the dim recesses of her memory she had heard that name. It was at the Savoyard upon that fateful night of fog when they had all gone to Vera's studio. Basil had said . . . what was it that Basil had told her about Traverson? A friend of his father's, she thought he was, to whom he was taking a letter of introduction. Some official, she had imagined, of the Egyptian government who would make things smooth for him in the mission upon which the *Record* had sent him. If this Traverson were out there in the desert within a mile or two of El Bahar then perhaps one of the men who would come with him would be Basil. Barbara sank down upon the couch, her hands clasped to her head . . . thinking . . . thinking. . . .

"Jebel."

The woman turned from the window.

"Madame."

"You know El Bahar . . . know it well?"

"As the palm of this hand, madame."

"Then listen. Is there a way by which one man, or two, perhaps, can enter the oasis unseen . . . enter this house?"

The woman thought for a moment.

"There is a way through the garden. It is choked up with weeds, madame, and never used now. But the weeds could be cut down. Robert Hassan's mother used it sometimes when she did not wish that her husband . . . but she was kind to me, madame, and it is ill to speak of the dead. But she pined for her own country, madame, and not being allowed to leave Egypt she consoled herself with her countrymen. They came from Paris on business with her husband. There was one, a secretary, who lived here a whole year. Madame was happy that year, when Raoul was here."

Barbara was silent. What story was this to which she was listening, what long dead romance of the scented oasis nights? In her mind's eye she saw the moonlight upon the garden, and a woman shawled and hooded who made her way to a gate, a gate now choked with weeds, and about which the tendrils of creepers had twined. What vows had been whispered beneath the palms that grew by the wall, what memories did Monsieur Raoul carry back with him to the boulevards, what memories did he leave in the heart of the woman who, like herself was a prisoner in El Bahar? The heart of Barbara went out to the shadowy mother of Robert Hassan.

"You must go at once, Jebel. There is no time to lose. Go to where the boy said Traverson is waiting. Find out from Mahmoud the exact spot; he will tell you when you say it is the English lady who asks. Promise him reward. Threaten him if necessary, and when you reach Traverson give him this ring, or, rather, you will take him a note which I will write. Give it to Monsieur Traverson, only to him."

"But madame . . ."

Barbara leant forward eagerly. "You will do this for me, Jebel. You need not return here. You will deliver my letter and make your way to the road and join one of the caravans going to Fassiut. Traverson will give you money. Make your way to Cairo. You have long wished to go to Cairo, Jebel. I, too, God willing, will soon be there and will enquire for you at Shepheard's."

"But the risk?"

"Is your life then so sweet, Jebel, that you can hesitate? If these friends attack El Bahar and the attack fails, Hassan will carry us further back into the desert, further from Cairo, Jebel, further from your daughter. Listen, I will swear by all I hold most sacred that I will not leave Cairo until we have news of your daughter. I have influence, friends who will rake the city. Think Jebel!"

For the space of a full minute Jebel stood at the window looking towards the north, peering forward with narrowed eyes as though to pierce the secret that lay over there across the sand by the well of Kabak. Then, without a word, she crossed to a small table upon which lay a writing pad and fountain-pen. These she carried across to her mistress.

"Write, madame," she said.

There was little time for thought, little for the choosing of words. Simply, briefly, Barbara Manton wrote of the things that had happened to her since she had left London. To this man of whom she knew nothing but that he was a friend of Basil's, she said nothing of the affair at Storm House. Certain as she was in her own mind as to the guilt of Robert Hassan, it were wiser to keep her suspicions from a letter that might unluckily fall into the hands of her enemies. Certain risks there were that must be faced, but the mention of the murder of Professor Gault could wait its time.

"Will you wait until it is darker, Jebel?"

"There is no need, madame. I will not be seen."

"And if you are missed, if Ali should enquire for you?"

Jebel threw out her palms. There was fatalism in the gesture.

"That, madame, must be faced. Should I speak to this Traverson?"

"Answer all that he asks of you. Go, Jebel, the moments will be like lead while you are gone."

Left alone Barbara gave herself up to her thoughts, and then, to pass the time of her anxious waiting, she set about what preparations it was in her power to make. Traverson, and perhaps Basil, might come to El Bahar at any moment and much might be required of her. A swift journey, perhaps, or even assistance in the fighting which, as likely as not, would take place. She changed her dress for a woollen coat-frock and put in readiness a light overcoat that had been bought for her by Hassan in Alexandria; she kicked off her canvas shoes and laced on a pair of serviceable brogues, and then sat at the lattice looking, as Jebel had looked, to the north . . . across the sands of the desert, the desert upon which night had now descended, night with its million stars and deathlike silences.

CHAPTER X

"DEADLY over-rated, this old East we read so much about, don't you think, Traverson?"

The man reclining upon the sand with his back against the bole of the date-palm took his pipe from his mouth, knocked out the dottle on to the sand, and grinned.

"How long have you been out here, Havers?"

"Three years."

"Amateur. When you've seen as much of the old East, as you call it, as I have, you'll change your song."

"Grow to like it, eh?"

"Grow to like it like hell. But it grows on you all right."

"But I always thought that you were the one that could never be happy away from all this." Havers waved his hand, taking in a comprehensive sweep of the desert.

"There's a whole lot of rot talked in this world, Havers, old son, and you're talking some of it right now. Shut up. I want to think."

"Right-o."

Bertie Traverson refilled and lighted his pipe. Two wisps of blue smoke spiralled lazily up into the still air. And after a minute or so the spiral from Traverson's briar grew tenuous, faded and died. Mr. Bertie Traverson had allowed his pipe to go out, and when a man whose pipe has been his one friend for a decade allows that to happen, his thoughts must be very engrossing indeed.

Those of Mr. Bertie Traverson were very engrossing. As a matter of fact they were centred about a certain letter which had been delivered to him as he was leaving Cairo, a letter to which the urgency of the business he had in hand had forbidden an answer. And Mr. Bertie Traverson would have liked very much indeed to have answered that letter. In person, preferably.

But he told himself that when this little affair connected with Robert Hassan and Basil Gault should have reached its denouement he would get back to Cairo without loss of time, and he would ask Miss Vera Peacock what she meant by it. Damned if he was going to let any little thing with corn-gold hair and big grey-blue eyes write to him like that. If that was "woman" then he had been well quit of them. Also he would see to it that he remained well quit. Funny things, women. You can dine them and they are all honey and sweetness, and then when you are alone and you are calling to mind the dreaming in their eyes or the fragrance of their hair . . . they sit down and write you letters.

What possible business could it be of Vera Peacock's who the girl was who was in the shrubbery at the Eden Palace with him? He supposed it was that inane thing jealousy that he had read about in stories. A thrill in that, perhaps, yes, decidedly a thrill, but disturbing nevertheless. Really he could not have people, male or female, probing into what was essentially his own business.

Mr. Bertie Traverson swore softly. His had been a wonderful life, a life with which, but a few short hours since, he had been eminently satisfied. Women had amused him, but he had never allowed them for one moment to become important to him. Cowardice, as like as not. Half the virtue in the world is cowardice after all. It wasn't fair for a blue-eyed, bobbed-haired wisp of loveliness to come barging into the well-ordered cloisters of his six and forty years without a by-your-leave or . . . He was too old for that sort of thing. And then he remembered reading somewhere that a man in the middle forties was at his zenith, his apogée. . . . Oh, hell!

Nice thing, bobbed hair. The sun plays such golden tricks with the rebellious waves and impudent little curls. Blue eyes . . . or were they grey? On the background of the desert night Mr. Bertie Traverson painted her, this lady of his dreams. Havers, watching him from beneath the tilted brim of his helmet, smoked stolidly and wondered what it was that was biting his chief. And then, even as he watched, he saw the dream-filled eyes glint into life, saw Traverson's hand fly to his belt.

"Not a step further. Who is that?"

From out the murky darkness there had materialised a figure. At the barked out words in Arabic it stood still as though turned to stone. Then, at a further command, two hands crept up and were held high and motionless. Havers laughed shortly.

"It's a woman, Traverson."

Traverson peered for a moment into the darkness then, satisfied that the intruder was alone, he lowered his automatic and beckoned to the woman to come nearer, asking her her name and place of abode and why she was outside the wall of the oasis so late.

Jebel walked forward, and as she came nearer Traverson saw that one of the brown hands held above her head was grasping a letter.

" You are Mr. Traverson ? "

" My name, woman. You come from . . . ? "

" From Miss Manton. This letter is for you."

" Drop it here at my feet. No, don't lower your arms."

Striking a match Traverson saw that the envelope was addressed to himself. Addressed evidently by someone who did not know him very well, for the superscription read — *Traverson, Esq.* He called to Havers to hand him the pocket flash, and in the beam of its light he read Barbara's letter.

" . . . And so, if you are the Mr. Traverson who is Basil's friend, come to me quickly for his sake. If he is a stranger to you then come for my sake. The woman who brings you this can be trusted. She will show you a way by which you can enter the house of Robert Hassan without being seen.

" BARBARA MANTON."

Traverson looked sharply at the woman.

" You come from Miss Manton. This moment ? "

" But half an hour since."

" And the contents of this," he tapped the letter with his forefinger. " You know them ? "

"Yes."

"And you can do what it says you can do."

Jebel nodded slowly.

"I can take you into the house of Robert Hassan. How many of you are there?"

"Two. In an hour, or perhaps two, there will be soldiers from Fassiut. They are but a few miles behind. How did you know we were here? You may lower your arms."

"One of Hassan's men saw you. He was on his way back from the caravan road where he had been to sell dates to the travellers."

"Then they are prepared?"

"My lord Hassan is not at El Bahar. Ali is prepared, but it is not as if the master were there in person. They are like sheep without a shepherd. You must do what the letter says. It is your only chance to reach Miss Manton without a fight. If there is a fight you and the soldiers from Fassiut will be killed."

Traverson turned to Havers who had risen to his feet and was now standing near the woman.

"It seems, Havers, as though we were in for a bit of a scrap. Basil and the soldiers will be here soon."

He turned to Jebel. "What time would be best for us to pay this little visit to the house of Robert Hassan?"

"It does not matter. Ali has but three or four men with him in the house. The others will be watching at the wall. Any time before the dawn."

Traverson moved a few paces towards the woman. He bent and flashed the light full upon her face gazing deep into her eyes. Jebel did not flinch.

"If there is treachery here . . ." He paused. He felt a little ashamed of himself at what he read in the woman's face.

"Havers," he said in English, "there's no double game here. Also, as the woman says, it is our only chance. We'll give Basil two hours to arrive. If he does not come in that time . . . well, two against three isn't such desperate odds. We've faced worse, eh, Havers?"

He turned again to the woman.

"Return to your mistress, tell her that before dawn she will be safe with friends. Make what preparations you think may help us." He unstrapped his automatic from his belt and handed it to Jebel. "And take this to your mistress with the compliments of Mr. Bertie Traverson. In three hours from now look for us. We will wait two hundred yards due north of the wall of the oasis."

Jebel bowed low to the sand and turned. Traverson stood watching her until the darkness swallowed her. Then he laughed.

"Bit of a risk, eh, Havers? But needs must when the devil drives. We wouldn't hold a chance in a million by a frontal attack now that they are prepared, and I wish to God that Basil would get a move on. He'll never forgive me if he isn't in this."

CHAPTER XI

JEBEL, looking down upon the sleeping Barbara, told herself that she would let her mistress sleep until the latest possible moment. Much, she reasoned, might be required of Barbara Manton before the sun of the new day, the day that was to be so full of hope for them, rimmed the horizon over towards El Hazab. And so, in the preparations which the woman made against the coming of Traverson, she moved silently, passing on tiptoe in and out between her mistress' room and her own. And in her passing she would look often from the small window that gave on to the garden and the gate through which, please Allah, their deliverance should presently come.

As her eyes became accustomed to the darkness Jebel could make out the wall where it joined the gateway, could see the feathery tops of the palms, and her mind travelled back down the vista of the years. Was that someone by the hedge . . . just to the right of the gate ? Merely people of your imagination, Jebel. The mother of Robert Hassan is long dead, her indiscretions forgotten. Raoul too, if he be still numbered with the living, is in far-away Paris, an old man now and alone, doubtless, with his memories. See, Jebel, they are no longer there . . . and, after all, if the ghosts of dead lovers care still to visit the scenes of their rose-time, what business is it of yours? Back to your mistress, Jebel, watch over her while she sleeps . . . then to your task.

And when at last the time was come, Jebel gave a last glance at the sleeping woman and descended the little stair and out into the garden. Taking a knife from the sleeve of her kaftan, the woman worked steadily and quietly at the strands of creeper that had grown about the latch. And when her work was done, she pushed open the wicket and sped ghostlike out into the shadow-filled streets of the village and so to the edge of the oasis.

She came upon Traverson and his men waiting a few hundred yards to the north of the wall. Soldiers were with them now, three or four of them, and Jebel noticed another Englishman whom she judged, remembering things that Barbara had told her from time to time, to be Basil Gault. With a whispered word to Traverson the woman turned, and led the way to where, dim in the night, the white blur that was the wall of El Bahar showed mistily.

Silently, like phantoms of the night, the little party filed across the sand and over the low wall where the shadows lay deepest. Then through narrow alley-ways in what might have been a city of the dead. Ali, posting what sentries he had been able to muster at short notice, had but covered the points from which he anticipated danger, and Jebel led the party to the hinder wall of the gardens without encountering anything more dangerous than a starving dog searching in the gutters for food.

Here, with the newly-cut creeper tendrils festooning its woodwork was the gate and, beyond, a very well of shadows, the garden. And, again beyond, the ghostly white of the house of Robert Hassan. The path, hardly to be discerned among the tangled undergrowth, twisted hither-thither, and through its windings passed the single file of Traverson's party.

Dawn was painting the edge of the desert in rose and glory when Barbara Manton was awakened to see, dim in the pearly light, the form of Jebel bending over her. The woman had one finger raised to her lips in warning.

"What is it, Jebel . . . Oh, I have been asleep! Did you see him?"

"You have slept till dawn, madame. Yes, I have seen him."

Barbara rose upon her couch. She clutched at Jebel's arm. "Tell me, Jebel . . . tell me."

The woman raised her head. Listening, Barbara could make out a low murmur, elusive and distant.

"What . . . ?"

"Hush, madame. They are there, downstairs."

And then she saw that Jebel had slipped to her knees and was unlacing one of her shoes. Barbara without speaking stretched out its fellow to her, and then in her stockinged feet followed Jebel across the room to the window. Looking down into the courtyard Barbara could see figures passing to and fro in the grey light that seemed to her to come throbbing up from the desert. There was no fighting, but she could hear the murmur of voices and once a man laughed. Then she felt Jebel's hand upon her arm and, turning, the two women crept down the stairs into the inner court.

At the foot of the stairs the giant figure of the Nubian was on guard and Barbara drew back into the shadows, stifling the cry that rose to her lips. But Jebel drew her onward with a grim smile as she remembered the preparations that she had made against the coming of Traverson. Had not Traverson told her to make what preparations that she had deemed necessary? Jebel praised Allah that she had been permitted to strike a blow with her own hand against the house of Hassan.

Barbara glanced over her shoulder as she passed the huddled figure and saw that the Nubian was dead. About the ebony column of his throat a thin silk scarf had been wound, a scarf curiously like the one she had noticed Jebel wearing. It eat deep into the black flesh. The swollen face in the grey light showed ghastly. The smile had passed from the face of Jebel leaving it as a mask, unreadable, and Barbara shuddered a little but forbade to question her. Together they passed on across the well of the inner court and into the alcove where but a few nights since Barbara had stood and watched the master of El Bahar gloating over that object which he had so carefully hidden away. Parting the curtain she looked into the room where she had dined with Robert Hassan.

As she looked over the rose-tinted luxury of the chamber a wave of shame passed over her. Once again could she feel Hassan's arms, the arms that had seemed to her like whip-cord, about her; again she could feel the hot, wine-tainted breath of the man as he had crushed his lips to her neck and throat . . . and then the memories passed and Barbara, drawing the curtain further aside, saw a strange sight.

Upon the couch where she had sat that night with Hassan lay the form of Ali, bound and helpless. Bending over him was a man of medium height, bronzed and wiry, who regarded the Arab through a monocle screwed firmly into the socket of his left eye. In one bronzed hand an automatic was held unwaveringly.

" And so you say that you know nothing of Miss Manton ? "

The man on the couch shook his head. Clearly Ali was not as yet aware of the extent of Traverson's knowledge. For this bronzed man must be the Traverson of Mahmoud's story and Basil's friend. She passed in between the curtains, letting them fall to behind her with a little rattle of rings on the brass pole.

" I think Ali is mistaken. I am Barbara Manton."

Bertie Traverson slowly turned his head, but Barbara noticed that the muzzle of the automatic wavered not an inch from its position close to Ali's forehead.

" Please come in, Miss Manton. Perhaps you may be able to make this gentleman listen to reason. Up to now he's been most stubborn."

But Barbara was not listening. Standing, holding in her hand the folds of the curtain behind her, she was gazing about the room as though in search of someone or something. Traverson laughed.

" You are looking for Basil ? "

She turned upon him eagerly.

" He is here ? "

" He was here a moment ago. He has gone upstairs, I think, to look for something . . . or someone. Basil seemed to be possessed by a singular oneness of purpose." He raised his head in the attitude of listening. " That sounds uncommonly like him."

Hasty steps upon the marble of the stairs and crossing the court. Barbara swung round.

" Basil . . . ! "

She was in his arms. The man's lips were pressed to her hair, her eyes, even as that other man's had been but a night or two before. Basil looked up and over her bowed head to Traverson.

" Fainted, I think. Help me, woman. Out there in the air on the balcony ! "

Traverson's voice came from across the room. " I'd give a hand myself but I don't like leaving this precious rascal. Perhaps it's as well that Miss Manton has fainted. There may be some awkward moments if this merchant doesn't come across with the goods. I like women to be out of the way when awkward moments come along, these sort of awkward moments. Take her out on the balcony. She'll soon come back to earth when she feels your arms round her. Meantime stay out there and thank God and Allah and little Zelie . . . Hold up "—this to Jebel—" that's no way to handle a fainting woman ! "

Traverson stood watching them as they passed from the room. Stood also watching the bound man on the divan whose glittering eyes glowered their defiance from out the swarthy face. Ali was in fighting mood if one was to judge by those eyes. Traverson pressed the muzzle of the weapon against the veined forehead.

" And now, friend Ali, you and I are going to have a little chat. Miss Manton was originally the first thing on our agenda, but it seems as though that little affair has solved itself. And so we can get on to the next item."

" What is it that you want of me ? "

" A whole lot, Ali. In fact, during the regrettable absence of Mr. Robert Hassan, you are the very man I've been pining to see. Listen. First I want you to send word out to the men in the village that the enemy has arrived by a back way a little earlier than was expected. A little ahead of schedule. You'll say that he's not really an enemy at all, and that he has no quarrel with the men of El Bahar. His business, you will say, is with Robert Hassan. Call back your sentries and send them about their business. In other words demob. Then, when that's all settled, you are going to tell me where Robert Hassan has gone and whether, as I suspect, his business had anything to do with certain Stones. That, I think, will be enough to be going on with."

Silence for a few moments. Traverson lowered his automatic, lit a cigarette, and waited.

" And if I refuse ? "

" You are not going to refuse."

Ali laughed. " We of the desert are not afraid to die . . . swine of an Englishman."

The eye behind the monocle gleamed. " I think we can dispense with vulgar abuse. It isn't done, Ali. And as to dying it's easy compared with the extreme measures that I sometimes use. Third degree . . . "

" Extreme measures ? "

" That's what I said, Ali. You are going to lie here bound as you are. At the first sign of treachery you die. Unpleasantly. The first shot fired by your men will re-act upon you here. Understand that. The tables in the little scrap you planned so carefully are turned, my friend. From being the attackers we have become the defenders. I fancy that the little arsenal I saw stacked up out there in the court will be ample for our needs. We ought to be able to hold this house against the village for a week of Sundays. Especially when we have such a valuable hostage as your good self."

"You mean a siege?"

"That is precisely what I do mean."

A sneer curled the lips of the bound man. "They will cut off the water which comes into the house from the fountain in the square. They will starve you into surrender in two days."

Traverson threw his cigarette end through the open window. He looked with commiseration upon the man on the divan.

"Don't be silly. I don't think the people out there will do anything so primitive. Besides, in twenty hours at most the rest of the soldiers I have asked for will be here from Fassiut. It's going to be a pretty little fight if there's going to be a fight at all, but I'm afraid you won't see it. Of course, if you agree to my terms, I'll send out into the desert to intercept the soldiers. Soldiers for private enterprises come expensive, and although friend Hassan will be footing the bill I want to be as fair as I can. Besides, they won't have their journey for nothing."

"I don't understand."

"No, Ali. I didn't think you would. I'll explain. When I send out to intercept the soldiers I'll send you, too. They can escort you back with them to Fassiut."

"To Fassiut?"

Traverson made a gesture of impatience. "Really, Ali, you're very dense. Fassiut is on the way to England. You're wanted in England, Ali, wanted badly. The punishment for smuggling cocaine into Britain is imprisonment, a few years only." He leant over the divan and sank his voice to a whisper. "But the punishment for murder is death."

The other did not answer. Traverson watching him could see that a greyness had spread beneath the brown of his skin. Into the eyes there came the look one sees in a hunted beast brought to bay.

"Death, Ali! . . . infidel hands about your throat . . . the rope!"

"And if I do as you wish. If I agree to your terms?"

Bertie Traverson straightened his figure and shrugged his shoulders.

"In that case, Ali, I will go so far as to abuse my authority and see that one scoundrel at least goes safe. Comparatively safe, that is. I want you first to write a true account of what happened at Storm House on that night a few weeks back. When you have done this, and I fancy you can do it pretty fully, and a few other little things I have in mind, I will have you arrested upon some small charge and lodged in the barracks at Fassiut. There you will remain until we have left Egypt. You will then be released through lack of evidence and can go where you damn please."

"But the authorities. The police of Cairo are no friends of mine."

"That I can quite well understand. Neither are they friends of your master Robert Hassan. Of course if the police have any axe of their own to grind with respect to yourself I can't very well interfere. But so far as the affair at Storm House and the smuggling are concerned, there will be no evidence offered against you. After all, whatever hand you had in either of these affairs, Robert Hassan was the prime mover. You were only the tool."

Traverson crossed the room and looked for a moment out on to the balcony. Then he returned to Ali.

"I wonder if you noticed who that was. He's a bit grimy and a sojourn in the cellars of the Green Figs is not conducive to . . . Oh, we know all about the Green Figs. It's just another strand of the rope that's going to hang Robert Hassan!"

"Gault . . . that was Mr. Gault?"

"Surest thing you know, Ali."

The eyes of the bound man rolled towards the French windows. Traverson went on.

"Not many men get out of the clutches of Maspar, Ali. Now, Ali, pull yourself together and think. Think hard. You must see that prison is by far the safest place for you in a country where Basil Gault happens to be prowling around. Now, how about it, as they say?"

"I will do as my lord wishes."

"Good for you. Then first you will call in that scared-looking nigger who is sentry-going out there with the obsolete Mauser. Tell him he's demobbed and hand him out the glad tidings that there 'ain't going to be no war.' After that I'll take the risk of untying your dirty hands and you're going to put in a most instructive hour over there at Robert Hassan's desk. Selah . . . or in other words, that's that."

Bertie Traverson lighted a fresh cigarette and passed out on to the verandah. It was in his mind to ask Basil not to disturb him for at least an hour by which time Ali's immediate future should have been arranged beyond any interference from Basil Gault. He paused on the threshold of the French windows and smiled, perhaps a little bitterly.

Basil and Barbara were at the far end of the balcony. They were seated very, very close together, and they were watching that wonder of the world, the sun rising over the Sahara. And Bertie Traverson had intended asking Basil not to disturb him for an hour. A week would have been nearer the mark.

And so Bertie Traverson sighed, told himself that youth must be served, and that to find oneself falling in love at the mature age of forty-six was the very devil. Then he returned to Ali.

very nice.
a nice [illegible]
Civilization.
Best
to
what the devil
[illegible] know

CHAPTER XII

" You see, Basil, our ways run together as far as the caravan road. We'll leave Miss Manton in charge of some reputable party going to Fassiut, and we'll push on south. Miss Barbara and the most excellent Jebel should be in Cairo in two days or three at the most, and Havers had better go on with them, don't you think ? "

" Yes, I'd like Havers to go along. Wish we were going as well."

Bertie Traverson raised his eyes from the scale map he had spread out upon the table in Hassan's room. Basil, he saw, was looking out over the rails of the verandah to where Ali, secure between two of the soldiers from Fassiut was awaiting his escort. Traverson leant back in his chair, bit at his moustache, and regarded Basil quizzingly.

" For the love of mike, old man, smile. Oh, I know what's biting you. The fellow out there. Really, some people are never satisfied. Ali didn't kill your father. Hassan did. I'm delivering Hassan into your hands according to schedule and you've just got to be content. Why you should want Ali as well beats me ! "

" He's as much to blame as Hassan."

" That's where you're wrong. No one is as much to blame as Hassan. Ali has only done what a thousand other servants steeped in tradition would have done. No, leave Ali out of this. You're greedy. I believe you want to boil the blighter in oil or something."

"He was at Storm House that night."

"Of course he was at Storm House. He was everywhere where Hassan was for years past. Everywhere his master wanted dirty work done, any way. Forget him. There, he's off. I don't fancy friend Ali is going to have a very pleasant journey to Fassiut. There's a look on that sergeant's face as though he means to belt hell out of him before they get far."

A smile, rather a wry one, chased the frown from Basil's face.

"I'm a pig, Traverson. But I'm disappointed."

"Then we'll let it go at that. You're a blood-thirsty ruffian, Basil, and I don't envy your wife one little bit if this cave-man attitude is kept up. A word from me and they will bastinado Ali every morning for a month in his cell. Anything doing?"

Basil's smile broadened. "We'll wipe Ali out. Now what's the programme?"

"The programme, Basil, is simple. We start in an hour. By afternoon we should make the caravan road. Then the parting. I'd love to see the reunion between Jebel and the pretty Zelie, but I'm afraid that's out of the question. Hassan has too long a start of us as it is."

"You don't think that Ali is pulling our legs about the location and the Stones?"

"My dear Basil, Ali has learnt the lesson of his sweet young life. When he leaves the prison in Fassiut he's going straight to the Fayum where he's going to grow cotton and praise Allah all his days. If anyone ever mentions such a thing as a Stone of Khor to him, I believe he'll brain him with a spade or whatever it is they grow cotton with. He helped Hassan to decipher the secret, and now he's going to wash his hands of the affair. He and Robert are the only two in the whole of Egypt who have seen the damn things together for over two thousand years. Remember, Basil, what I told you about things working out in this old country? "

Basil nodded, but did not answer. He looked out across the desert and it was as though he saw, shimmering in the heat waves, the puppets in the drama in which he had played a part. Barbara was there and Hassan, Jebel and her Zelie, the keeper of the Green Figs, Ali and all the others. They were like marionettes dancing to the string-pulling of fate.

And then his fancies were broken into by reality. And a very charming reality it was. Barbara mounted upon a wiry little pony was approaching, and with her Jebel and Havers and the men from Fassiut. Two led horses waited in the courtyard for Basil and Traverson.

Basil and Barbara rode side by side. They were the last to pass out through the gap in the wall that surrounded the oasis. The girl reined in her pony and looked back. The little village of El Bahar was drowsing in the heat, a little daub upon the face of the desert, a daub of white walls and feather-capped palms. Basil looked at her, but the girl did not notice him. He read suffering upon her face, bitter memories in her eyes, but the questions that rose to his lips remained unspoken. In God's good time Barbara would speak, would lie in his arms and unburden her soul of the days that she had spent alone in the wilderness with Robert Hassan. A yearning came over him, a burning desire to lean across from his saddle and take the slender figure into his arms there and then . . . but there was that in the sweetly-clouded eyes of Barbara Manton that prompted the man who loved her to ride on in silence.

Once again, after a few minutes' riding, the girl turned her head. Basil, turning also, saw that the heat mists had trailed, as it were, fairy veils across the desert, shrouding in pearly gauze the oasis of El Bahar. Barely discernible now the minarets and the clustered palms. El Bahar seemed as though it were but a mirage, a figment of the imagination. Glancing at Barbara, Basil told himself that the thought had come to him, had come also to the girl, that in the wondrous life that stretched out before them, El Bahar and all that El Bahar stood for would be but a mirage, something that dreams are made of . . . without reality, without significance.

But that wondrous life was not yet. Somewhere to the south was Robert Hassan. In a little while Traverson and Basil would have bade farewell to Barbara and then . . . Basil Gault's hands tightened upon the reins and his lips set in a thin thread of determination.

And so the little party rode on past the well that is by Kabak, riding north towards the caravan road that crosses the desert to Fassiut and the railway.

The ride through the heat was, so far as Basil and Barbara were concerned, a somewhat silent one. Perhaps the thought of further separation acted as a drag upon their spirits, perhaps the reaction from the agonies of suspense had taken toll of them both. Once, glancing across his saddle bow to the drooping girl riding beside him and noting the tired lines that showed upon the face that he had known always dimpled with laughter, he had felt tempted to push forward to where Bertie Traverson was riding with the captain of the soldiers from Fassiut, and tell that gentleman that, so far as he was concerned, the desert, in giving up Barbara Manton, had given up all the treasure that mattered or would ever matter, and that the Stones of Khor could go hang. But one moment's reflection had sufficed to drive all such weakness from him. He thought of the grave in Hampstead Cemetery where his father lay unavenged, he thought of Robert Hassan made wealthy beyond the dreams of emperors. Basil Gault was not the man to leave unfinished that to which he had put his hand.

It was not until the road had been reached and the parting made that the enormity of his lapse came home to him. With Barbara riding by his side his sense of adventure, more, his sense of right, had weakened, but as he watched the caravan that Barbara and Jebel and Havers had joined pass away over the desert in the direction of Fassiut and the railway, he became once more himself, the man of set purpose, eager to get at grips with his enemy. Now that, as companion, he had only the hard-bitten Bertie Traverson, things assumed a vastly different aspect. For moments together he even found himself forgetting Barbara Manton.

Somewhere within a few hours ride of them was Robert Hassan, the man whose lines had crossed his and whom he had so lately seen among the laughter and glitter of the dancing salon at the Savoyard. For the most part Traverson rode silently, his mouth set in grim lines, busy, as Basil was busy, with the immediate future. Many were the times he had crossed swords with Robert Hassan to be foiled again and again by the man's cunning and by his influence over the natives. But this time . . .

" Did Ali tell you much about this Island of Kolos ? "

Traverson smiled wryly. "My dear Basil, I fancy that Ali had all his time taken up thinking about his very uncertain future to care to talk much about anything. He gave me the location and that was all. Ali was feeling a pretty sick man when they took him off. Our friend here," and Traverson nodded behind him to where a corporal chosen from the soldiers followed them, "knows all about the place. That's why I chose him. I've been chatting to him since we left El Bahar and I've improved the shining hour some."

"You seem to trust Ali pretty thoroughly."

"At the present moment, Basil, I'd trust Ali with my life. He's going to the gaol at Fassiut and there he'll wait until I give the word, the unofficial word, mind you, to let the scoundrel go. No, I don't fancy that Ali has played us false."

"How far?"

"We should reach the right bank of the Nile by sundown. Then we'll have to be guided how to act. Since the building of the dam at Assouan the island is often submerged. There's a temple on it, to Isis I think, and in pre-Christian times it was about the most sacred spot for miles around. The old priests knew what they were about when they hit on the Island of Kolos for their hiding-place when old Piankhi swooped down upon them. A pretty superstitious crowd the old Egyptians, and the very stones of Kolos were supposed to be sacred and not to be trodden save by the elect, which means the priests themselves."

"But it seems a long way from Memphis."

"I expect they had due warning and, after all, they could follow the river all the way. Can't you see the procession of boats with the big sweeps dropping down into the sunset. Oh, a wonderful place this old Egypt, and a wonderful old brook this Nile of theirs!"

Basil gazed across the waste of sand and scrub to where the sun in its going had painted the horizon in crimson and gold and glory.

"I often wonder whether one can ever do really without a place like this when one had really got to know it like you have. All other places would seem tame, I should say. The East a-callin' and all that, you know."

"I thought that way myself once," said Bertie Traverson, and after that rode on for quite a while in silence.

On, ever southwards, they rode. The glow in the west deepened, faded into night, and still in the starlight the men went on. On past groves of date palms and through little villages where nothing seemed to have changed since the Pharaohs built their pyramids. Now and again their road would give them star-jewelled glimpses of the Nile, gardens falling to the river edge, swaying palms above high villa walls. The sheen of the Egyptian night shone ghost like upon walls of old temples, built when the world was young, by pious hands to the glory of their gods and the wonder of the ages. Columns of sculptured stone, pylons to the victories of kings, purple shadows of tombs. . . . Basil, too, fell silent, awed by the magic and the mystery of it all.

Then, when the moon was but an hour up, Mustafa, their soldier guide, cantered up to them and pointed to where, a tiny blurr upon the broad waters of the Nile, lay their journey's end. The Island of Kolos was but a low-lying series of rocky ledges and sand hummocks with here and there a clump of starved scrub and a few sickly palms. The ruins of the temple itself, barely to be separated from the outcrop of rocks, made a broken line against the sky. And above all a silence like a mantle thrown by the envious gods over the secrets of the ages.

The men dismounted and led their horses into a little grove of palms that grew close down to the water's edge. And while Mustafa set about the preparing of their evening meal, Basil and Traverson stretched themselves upon the sand and filled their pipes.

"I only hope we're not too late. Hassan had a good pull of us in the time. A whole lot depends upon whether he knew precisely where to lay his hands upon the stuff. It may be hidden deep in the—— What's that for, Traverson?"

For Traverson had leant forward suddenly and had with a swift motion knocked the pipe from Basil's hand. Looking at him Gault saw that the man was gazing with narrowed eyes across the water to where the Island of Kolos lay bathed in the moonlight.

"What is it, Traverson?"

"Watch, Basil . . . there, away to the left."

Gault followed Traverson's pointing hand. From somewhere in the black mass of rock a tiny light showed yellow, gleamed for a moment in the darkness, and went out. Basil felt Traverson's hand close over his own.

"No more smoking, Basil. I'm sorry. Mustafa, we'll have cold supper to-night."

"But, monsieur, the coffee . . ."

"We'll have that cold, also, or rather you can. Mr. Gault and myself will have a cut at that bottle over there in my saddle pocket. If you so much as strike a single match, Mustafa, I'll brain you—and you, too, Basil."

Then in silence they sat and watched the smudge of blackness that was the Island of Kolos.

CHAPTER XIII

ANY fears that the Isis-worshipping ancestors of Mr. Robert Hassan might have felt at setting foot within the sacred confines of Kolos bothered that gentleman not at all. If there were any disturbance of mind hidden away beneath his placid exterior, it was caused by the thought that, owing to unforeseen difficulties in the matter of a boat, he had arrived upon the island too late to carry out the programme that had been forming in his mind since he had ridden from El Bahar. An hour or two earlier and he could have commenced operations and have been far away from the Nile and any danger that might threaten from others who would gather the treasures of the priest-kings to themselves.

The minute directions written upon the Stones of Khor should, had he read them aright, make a lengthy stay upon the island unnecessary, and it had been Hassan's hope that he might, while it was yet day, be done with the business and pass the night at the inn in the village that nestled upon the right bank of the Nile a league to the north where he had left his horse. And by daybreak he would be on his way back to El Bahar to reap the reward of the past somewhat strenuous weeks. For although superstitious fears had little place in the person of Robert Hassan, he had no liking for a lonely night with nothing to bear him company but the wash of the river and the howling of jackals away out over the desert.

Moreover, he did not like the news that had reached him through his spies that Traverson, his arch enemy, had joined forces with Basil. As to the latter, fortunately, he had no doubts. Exit from the cellars of the Green Figs and its janitor, except by way of Maspar's Tunnel to the Nile was difficult and, indeed, unheard of, but Traverson was a horse of an entirely different colour. It was the thought that Traverson might be close upon his heels that warned Hassan that it would be as well to get through with the business of Kolos and hurry back to El Bahar with as little delay as possible. The need, now that the secret agent was leagued with his enemies, of placing as great a distance between Barbara Manton and civilisation had become paramount.

Had he dared, Robert Hassan would have kindled a fire and worked by the light of his electric torch. Even the striking of a match to light a cigarette was a risk, but it was a risk that he would take. Very few people upon the banks of the Nile at this spot, and the man whose boat he had hired was already back in his home in the village. Only one match would he allow himself, and then he would be able to smoke throughout the night, lighting one cigarette from the stub of the previous one.

And so Robert Hassan sat amid the ruins of the Temple of Isis and smoked the opium-flavoured cigarettes that Hussein of the Sharia Doubreh in Cairo manufactured specially for him and let his mind run in the pleasant channels of Barbara Manton and the wonderful life that stretched out before him. Yes, it was going to be a wonderful life.

True, Barbara did not yet love him. What of that ? The man smiled to himself in the darkness as he thought of the fierce delight he would take in taming her spirit, in forcing her to love him. She would not be the first who had succumbed to coercion. But Barbara was different from most women he had met, and he would have to go subtly to work. None knew better than Robert Hassan the curious psychology that sleeps in every woman's heart, waiting but the touch of a finger to set in motion its hidden forces.

In his mind's eye he again saw the ordered luxury of the Savoyard, the gilded salons of Paris. . . . Perhaps, when the unfortunate episode of Professor Gault's death should have ceased to be even a nine days' wonder and the exploits in Limehouse should have passed into ancient history, it might be possible for him to venture back into the haunts of the West. Meanwhile, with Barbara as his companion, the East would serve.

A young moon hung low over the distant hills, and by its elfin light Hassan could see the noble proportions of the ruined temple. A little to the left of where he was sitting had been the great courtyard where the priests had performed the solemn rites to the goddess. The building of the great dam at Assouan had long ago submerged the floor of the courtyard, and the pillars and pylons rose sheer in sculptured pomp from the still waters. Across the river the low bank of the Nile lay in mist. Hassan smiled grimly as the eternal silence of the place fell upon his senses. No one to disturb Robert Hassan in working out the destiny of the centuries.

He rose to his feet and treading carefully in the uncertain light of the moon, the man passed across the sand hummocks to where a large pylon stood alone. No need for him to refer to the writing he had taken of the message of the Stones, nor to the Stones themselves, for he knew what was written upon their grey-green surfaces by heart. If the moon should grow brighter as the night advanced, if no clouds should come up, he might even yet be able to complete his task. In an hour perhaps . . .

He made his way back to his seat at the foot of one of the pillars near the courtyard and to his dreaming. Once only were those dreams disturbed. It had been when the waking dreams had been upon the point of merging into sleeping ones that a soft oily splash came to his ears from the flooded courtyard. He remembered something that his guide, before he had pushed off in his boat, had said about crocodiles, but Hassan had laughed. There were no crocodiles in the Nile so far to the north. One of the legends originated by the priests, no doubt, to keep prying eyes from their holy of holies and handed down from generation to generation. . . . And yet it was eerie in that half-darkness to hear that soft oily slither of the water. . . . Perhaps he had dreamed it, such things come to one often just as one is passing from wakefulness to slumber.

Robert Hassan sat rigid, his ears attuned to catch anything that might be stirring. But all was silent.

The man seated at the foot of the pillar slept fitfully, a sleep troubled and disturbed by strange dreams. From a particularly vivid one he awoke with a start. He had been back along the centuries in the days when priests held sway over the temples of Egypt before the shadow of the Cross fell upon its ancient gods. It was as though he had been standing in a huge gallery of noble pillars through which passed a never-ending procession of strangely-garbed figures. Men with shaven heads and white-robed women. There was one of these latter who had the carriage and features of Barbara Manton as she had looked upon the night of the ball when she had come out to Hampstead in her robes of white. From between the pillars faces peered out at him from the gloom, faces familiar to him, faces of those whom he had known in Egypt and in London. . . . Ali was there and Maspar and Professor Gault and Vera Peacock.

It seemed to him that in his dream he had joined in with the procession, singing with them, passing out between the giant pylons on to the banks of the river. . . .

Now he was standing alone by what appeared to be a spacious bath. The others had left him. About him were ruins, great towering masses of hewn rock, pillars with capitals that blocked out the stars. Away across the water the young moon-goddess was silvering with her pale light the slowly flowing Nile. . . . Surely this was the Island of Kolos.

The man came to himself with a start. He rubbed his eyes free of their dreams. Once as a child he had walked in his sleep, and the memory of his awakening had always been with him—an ever-growing terror. Of later years he had told himself that he had outgrown the habit, but now here he was upon the brink of the flooded courtyard, and there, over by the sand hummocks, was where he had been sleeping. He laughed to himself, a nervous laugh, for the fear of the place at last was upon him, taking a hold upon his half-awakened senses. He turned to retrace his steps, and as he did so the eyes of Robert Hassan fell upon a spot where a pale patch of moonlight dimly illumined the shore of the island. With a strangled cry the man fell back crouching in the mass of shadow that lay about the foot of one of the pillars.

Standing motionless as though carved in stone, and silhouetted sharply against the dull greyish white of the temple ruins was a figure, a figure that in some curious way was vaguely familiar. The pale moonlight faintly gleamed on wet flesh, and Hassan, looking with terror-filled eyes, saw that the man, if man it was, was naked, save for a short pair of drawers bound about his waist with a knotted kerchief.

Slowly the figure turned its head and looked towards the shadows where Hassan was crouching. And the fatalism that was part and parcel of Robert Hassan gripped at his heart with a hand of ice. All the superstitions held by his forebears that he had thought to have stifled crowded thickly back upon him. Surely men who entered the water of the Nile by way of Maspar's Tunnel did not float to the Island of Kolos. Back, back deeper into the shadows cringed the lord of El Bahar. From between his lips words came huskily . . .

"Gault . . . Basil Gault. . . ."

CHAPTER XIV

"GAULT . . . Basil Gault. . . ."

The words seemed to the speaker of them as though uttered by someone at a great distance. A whisper only, but a whisper that in the deep silence of the night carried to the man standing on the bank of the Nile, for he turned his head slowly and stared into the shadows where Robert Hassan crouched motionless. For a moment he stood rigid, every sense tuned to listen, then, as though the knowledge had come to him that, exposed as he was, he was a sure mark for a hidden enemy, he leapt forward and was lost to sight where the rocks of the island merged into the outer wall of the ruin. And then silence once more, the dead cloying silence of the African night.

To Robert Hassan it was a silence peopled with terrors. While the man had been standing in the moonlight there had been something tangible to combat, but now, as it came to him that somewhere about him, perhaps so near that he might touch him, was his enemy, his fear increased twenty-fold. The leap into the shadow had told him that this was a man of flesh and blood with whom he had to deal and no figment of his imagination and, if a man, then without a doubt that man was Basil Gault, a Basil Gault risen from the dead. And Basil Gault would not be alone upon the Island of Kolos. A boat must have brought him and a boat would require rowers, men who no doubt were waiting also in the shadows, waiting to strike.

Once again Robert Hassan rubbed his fingers over his eyes. Again he tried to tell himself that he was still dreaming, and that what he had seen or imagined he had seen was but the aftermath of his night visions. He had been thinking of Basil, he remembered, as he had passed to sleep, and the mind suddenly awakened has often strange fancies. How could Basil, whom he had left safely bound in the cellars of the Green Figs, be standing naked upon the shores of Kolos? The idea was preposterous, unthinkable.

Bending forward the man edged his way round the great mass of the pillar until he could see the whole of the flooded courtyard of the temple. It lay grey with inky shadows in the pale light of the moon. Not a thing was stirring. Away across the water the mainland lay like a smudge, and low on the horizon the stars seemed to hang like lamps that had been left burning in some vast domed cathedral. The broken pillars and pylons were mirrored in the waters of the courtyard. Far out in the desert a jackal howled.

Robert Hassan found his courage ebbing back to him. Foolish to go to sleep in this temple of the dead to be assailed by all manner of dreams and fancies. He looked up at the stars, judging from their positions how soon it might be before dawn should come creeping up over the Nile, giving him light to complete his task and dispelling the vapours of the night. And that task finished, nothing upon earth or heaven should tempt him to again set foot upon the accursed island. He would sleep no more. In a little while it would be light and he could . . .

"I've got you covered, Robert Hassan, you swine. Go out there in that patch of moonlight by the archway. Quickly!"

The voice came from the left, the right . . . from everywhere. Hassan, his fears thickly upon him, peered hither-thither, his body rigid, as though carved in stone. The man was not without courage of a sort, but it was the courage bred of the bully, of the man who knew that those he over-rode had not the power to retaliate. Moreover, what small courage had been his had been badly sapped by the darkness—and this voice that came from nowhere, from everywhere. These were things which Robert Hassan did not understand. An erring servant, an impudent mistress, a wayward horse, all these things he knew well how to deal with; but this cold, incisive voice from the darkness was another matter. It fell upon his ears like the crack of doom.

"Quickly, I said . . . I could shoot you down here and now. I've a right to, God knows, but I don't do things that way."

"Is . . . that . . . Basil Gault?"

"Never mind who I am for the moment. All you have to do is to step out there into the moonlight. I'm going to count ten. One . . . two . . . three . . ."

Acting as though of a volition not wholly his own, Robert Hassan rose from his crouching position and stepped out upon the triangular carpet of moonlight that came through the broken roof of the archway. He stood there like a man in a dream trying to pierce the shadows that clustered about him.

" Where are you, Gault . . . for God's sake ? "

Again the voice from the darkness. The voice from nowhere, from everywhere.

" We are going to start level in this thing, Hassan. You don't deserve it but we're going to. Take off your coat."

Hassan's hands crept up to the buttons of his waistcoat. Then with a return of his pride he paused.

" Quickly. That's it. Now your other things. Everything but your trousers. Throw them over there into the water. Any weapons ? "

" No."

There was silence while the man standing upon the brink of the courtyard obeyed the voice. He took off his coat and other garments until he stood as Basil had but a few moments ago stood, clad only in his nether garments. He bent and gathered the heaped up clothes into his arms and let them fall into the flooded court. They fell with a dull splash, lay for a moment spreading grotesquely upon the glassy surface, then with a thrill of horror Hassan saw the coat sink slowly, as though drawn beneath the water by some invisible power . . . some Thing that lurked in the depths. He remembered the dull swirl of waters that had come to his ears as he had drowsed among the sand hummocks.

Again that devilish voice from the infinite, the voice that was surely draining Hassan of all nerve, all courage.

"Listen, Hassan. I'll tell you what has happened. Traverson is over there on the bank. There's a soldier with him, a guide from Fassiut. They are due to wake at any time now and row across. We took a watch each. Three hours. I'm spending my three hours this way. I told Traverson that you were my affair alone. I swam over while they slept, swam over to pay my score to Robert Hassan. Hands up! Do you understand what I mean?"

"You mean . . . man to man . . . out here?"

"I mean just that. As I said, I could shoot you now and rid the world of a very dirty scoundrel. I think you murdered my father. I don't rightly know and I don't think I want to know . . ."

"I didn't kill your father, Gault. It was an accident. I tried to buy the Stone from him, and when he would not sell I think I went mad. Remember, Basil, the Stones are ours, the Hassan's. I caught hold of the Professor . . . and he fell . . ."

A short laugh from the darkness.

"Perhaps I believe you. If I didn't I think I'd have to shoot you here and now. But there are other counts between you and me, Robert Hassan. Hands up again."

There in the moonlight stood the lord of El Bahar, the thin trousers buckled about the slim, girl-like waist. The sheen of his olive skin was tinted by the moon rays into green bronze. From the shade of one of the pillars Basil Gault came slowly. He held one hand in the right pocket of his trousers, and the projection of cloth suggested to the waiting man an automatic, the muzzle pointed towards him. Keeping it so pointed Basil ran his free hand over the other's garment. Then with a laugh he took his right hand from his pocket, showing in it a fountain-pen.

"An old ruse, Hassan, but here in the moonlight quite effective. Now, Robert Hassan, we're going to fight this thing out. I'm a fool to give you a chance, but unfortunately I'm built that way. I want to go back to London, and I am going back, with clean hands."

"One moment, Gault. If it's about Barbara . . ."

Swift as a piston rod, as the name left Hassan's lips, Basil's left shot out and behind it was all the skill and force that had won him ring honours at Oxford. The Egyptian staggered, then, crouching like a panther, he leapt at Basil. Thin bronze arms, whipcord and wire, were about him. He felt the sharp teeth of Robert Hassan in the flesh of his shoulder . . . And this was the man to whom he had given the chance of fair fight.

Together, locked, the men went rolling this way and that, in and out of the shadows, almost overhanging the waters of the flooded courtyard of Isis. In this manner of fighting Robert Hassan was more sure of his ground. As a youth he had wrestled with many a young Turk in the villages, and now as he lay straining every muscle to the undoing of his enemy, he was calling to mind the tricks that he had known and used in those boyhood battles, fouls that had won him many a victory.

And Basil felt himself almost powerless in that grip of steel. Powerless, but in no great danger. Once Hassan should release his hold, the tables would very quickly be turned. They lay scarcely stirring, their breath coming in little staccato gasps. Once Robert Hassan raised his head and glanced behind him. The moonlight shone in the whites of his eyes. It was as though some fierce beast of the jungle had been disturbed while crouching over the carcase of his victim.

From across the water came a cry. Weirdly the cadences rose wailing over the water, rousing the echoes of the sleeping land. Someone over on the bank was hailing Basil. The sound ceased, and presently to the ears of the fighting enemies there came the distant plash of oars. In a little while Traverson would land upon the island . . . and the work that Basil Gault had set himself to do alone was not yet done. The man relaxed for one moment, raising his head to hear more clearly the sounds of Traverson's coming. That moment was enough for Robert Hassan. A subtle twist and, like a spring released, Hassan was up and on his feet. Before Basil could take in what had happened, the lithe form of the Egyptian had been swallowed up in the mosaic of shadows that surrounded the pool. From somewhere came a mocking laugh.

"Hide-and-seek, eh, Basil? My turn to hide. And whoever wins he will not find the Stones of Khor. I know the inscriptions by heart, Basil. The only man in the world. . . . Listen, Basil Gault."

Basil stood rigid. From the shadow came the sound of something being ground to pieces beneath a stone. The blows sounded staccato, and he knew that the man who lurked in the darkness was destroying for all time the secret of the treasure of Memphis. In Hassan's brain alone it lay, an asset to be bargained with when all else should fail. The mocking voice went on.

"And so you see, my dear Basil, I'm necessary to you. It wouldn't do for you to kill me or anything foolish like that. Traverson's coming. He should be here in ten minutes. An armistice, Basil, shall we say an armistice while we talk of terms?"

There was no answer. Again the mocking laugh rang out, but now there was a strain of nervous tension in it. The echoes of the vast place took up the sound, sported with it, sent it throbbing out over the water.

"Fifty-fifty, eh? That seems fair, Basil, doesn't it?"

Silence again for a moment, then, as the thought came to Basil that he would not be granted the time to finish single-handed that which had brought him to the island, the man plunged forward into the darkness, running hither and thither between the pillars in the direction from which the voice had seemed to come. Why had he not waited for morning and the company of Traverson, instead of setting about this business in so quixotic a fashion? Hassan was a worm, a rat to be hunted and trodden underfoot, such a wretch should not be allowed to fight like a man. Any advantage that Basil had held by being the attacker was now gone. They started even in the fight that was yet to come.

Already clouds were massing upon the horizon, passing now and again across the face of the moon. In a little while the Island of Kolos would be as dark as the pit and heaven alone knew how many hiding-holes there might be where the hunted man might lie concealed until the hunt had passed. Perhaps Hassan had been there upon the Island of Kolos before and would be able to play the game of hide-and-seek to his own tune.

And then, with an eerie suddenness, the light failed, and darkness, the deep velvety darkness of Africa, settled over the Temple of Isis. From the far edge of the desert there came the moaning that speaks of the coming storm.

" Hassan . . . "

A laugh from the darkness to his left. The laugh of a fiend in hell.

Then suddenly Basil was upon him, stumbling over the crouching form in the darkness. Hassan slipped from under him, doubled and ran like a hare. Basil could hear the slither of his feet in the rubble of loose earth. Then footsteps on firmer ground . . . stonework perhaps . . .

" God . . . "

In the days that were to come Basil never forgot that cry. It shot through the blackness and the echoes took the word and sent it wailing through the ruined galleries. Basil stood transfixed, the chill hand of sheer terror upon him.

" Basil. . . . "

It was Hassan's voice, vibrant with supplication. And, listening, Basil could hear the splashing of water. In a flash the truth came to him. He saw in his mind's eye Robert Hassan running fear stricken through the darkness, slipping in the loose rubble of broken earth and stones and falling into the flooded waters of the courtyard. He crept forward as quickly as was consistent with safety. A moment and he stood upon the brink.

Out over the faintly-lit surface of the water he sent his gaze. It was true. The surface showed ripples, little eddies. But Hassan he could not see. He remembered with a shudder how he had seen the man's coat dragged beneath the surface. Perhaps, after all, it was but the wind of the coming storm that ruffled the water . . .

" Hassan . . ."

No answer. The wind soughed through the broken columns of the temple and in the fronds of the palms. Basil called again. This time it was answered by Traverson.

" Gault. Where are you ? "

" Here, Traverson. By the water. Go carefully, Traverson . . . there's something horrible here."

And there Bertie Traverson found him, staring down at the dark water. Basil's face was terrible to look at.

" What is it, man ? "

Gault pointed. His lips moved, but no sound came from them. Traverson caught him by the arm.

" What is it, Basil . . . pull yourself together."

" In there, Traverson. Did you hear anything ? "

Traverson took from his pocket a flash lamp and sent the tiny pencil of light back and forth across the surface of the water. The ripples were dying down and all was quiet, deadly quiet. And then the man narrowed his eyes and moved cautiously round the edge of the stonework. Gault turned to follow, but his knees seemed powerless to support him. He stood, one hand upon a pylon to steady himself, looking after Traverson, motionless and sick. He watched him stop at a spot where somehow the water looked different, as though it lay in deeper shadow, watched him lean from the coping of the stonework and touch lightly the surface. Bertie Traverson held his finger-tip in the ray of the pocket lamp. Then slowly he returned to where Basil was waiting.

"We'll be getting back, old fellow."

But Basil did not move. He was staring at the hand that held the lamp.

"What's that on your finger, Traverson ?"

"Nothing. Come along. The boat's over there."

Traverson was laughing nervously. Basil had never seen the man so moved. He reached out and took the hand that held the lamp. Then, seeing the faint red tinge, he dropped it with a cry. Traverson was speaking, trying to school his voice.

"Pretty horrible, Basil, isn't it ? The beasts lurk about in some of these out of the way pools," he was saying. "I've heard of them being seen as far up as Fassiut. Rare, though, very rare. . . . Hold up, Basil old chap . . . we can't have any fainting out here. . . ."

very tragic

CHAPTER XV

THERE is a little rise in the ground to the north of the spot that had been chosen by Traverson for their camp. As the friends reached the brow upon the morning following the visit to Kolos, Traverson reined in his horse and turned in the saddle.

" Twenty years of adventure, Basil, my boy, but I really think that for sheer unadulterated horror, last night beats the band. We didn't have any cause to exactly love Robert Hassan but . . . "

Basil was looking back across the sand. Out in the middle of the Nile, pale, opalescent like a jewel, lay the Island of Kolos. The pillars of the Temple of Isis rose majestic into the green and golden glory of the desert dawn. Basil opened his lips as though he would reply to Traverson then closed them and rode grimly on. The other man watched him narrowly.

" I'm wondering, Basil, whether, in your journalistic experiences, you have ever burst, as it were, into fiction."

" One hardly needs imagination after what we saw last night. Truth stranger than fiction and all that, you know."

" Yes, I know all about that. But have you ever tried your pen at stories ? "

" A short one or two. Also an unfinished novel. Why ? "

" Only that I'm thinking it's time you put in a little heavy work in that direction. I mean to say . . . well, damn it all, we can't very well tell Miss Manton and Ver . . . I mean Miss Peacock any harrowing details of what took place last night. It simply isn't done."

" No, we can't tell them that."

" And yet we have got to tell them something. Ladies are the very devil to want to know about everything."

" You mean that we'll have to concoct some yarn to account for the disappearance of Mr. Robert Hassan. Something innocuous."

Traverson nodded.

" That's the ticket. Something conclusive but not too horrible. So put on your thinking cap, Basil, and sketch out a rough plot, as it were. I'm about as useful at this game as snow is in harvest. I may be able to sling in a few picturesque details, local colour, don't they call it ? "

Really it was not a bad story at all. Long before they reached Fassiut they had it all cut and dried. It was not without horror of a sort; it was necessary, Traverson said, that they should be careful not to lay themselves open to suspicion. It had plenty of local colour in it. Traverson even thought that it might work up into a play. He said he knew a man who ran revues and had an interest in the film business. He'd speak to him about it, and perhaps put in a month or two himself working on it."

" A busy man like you ? " Basil had asked.

Traverson looked away. He was biting his moustache.

"As a matter of fact, Basil, I thought of taking a holiday. Damn it all, I haven't had a day off for about twenty years. I may retire altogether."

"And find some nice girl and settle down?"

"Stranger things have happened."

And there was that in Traverson's voice that told Basil that he was not joking. Also a certain wistfulness as though the man would welcome a confidant.

"Out with it, Traverson, old man!"

"Out with what?"

"That question, my dear Traverson, is the last defence of a man who has been too long his own confidant. Who's the girl?"

A moment's pause only. Then: "Vera Peacock. . . . I've only seen her two or three times, but that's quite enough when a man's forty-seven. The dangerous age, isn't it? You see, I haven't too much time to lose. Ran into her at Shepheard's where some old rascal of a gutter merchant was pulling the old wheeze of the broken Rameses, or Seti I think it was. She knows you, she told me."

"We're quite good pals. You told me she had come out to Egypt; in fact it was a hundred to eight on in my own mind before you told me the glad tidings. Congratulations, old man, and all that. Vera's no end of a sport."

Traverson held up a hand.

"Steady on, Basil. Forty-seven isn't any sort of a certainty when it goes courting twenty-five. Gad, I feel a hundred. Not quite May and December but, shall we say, June and October. Of course, I'm thinking of Vera as well as Miss Manton when I say that we must wipe out all thought of how Hassan died. Wipe it clean out. We don't want to start honeymooning with nightmares like that."

" Afraid it'll be some time before I'll get that cry out of my ears. But you're quite right about the ladies knowing. You coming back to England with us ? "

" If I may. To tell the truth, Basil, this has about sickened me of the East for a long while to come. I'm getting a bit long in the tooth, I guess, to go chasing up and down the desert till the cows come home. What's the time ? "

" Seven."

" We should be at Fassiut to-night but not in time for the Cairo train. There's a fair hotel, and I'm just dying for clean sheets and a whisky-and-soda. We can wire to Miss Manton from there."

That night over a final cigar the two men rehearsed carefully the story they had concocted. The principal details were duly noted in memorandum books so that there should be no slip-up when the narration of their adventures should become necessary. Traverson gazed across the verandah of the hotel to where the waters of the Nile showed darkly.

" . . . And Hassan, we'll say, took the revolver from your hand as you fell. He shot at me but the shot went wide. Then he put a bullet through his own heart."

" Head, didn't you say ? "

" I think heart will be better, don't you ? Not quite so messy."

Traverson threw the stub of his cigar over the rail. "Just as you like, Basil. All the same to me but we must both say the same thing or the ladies will scent a rodent. And what a lovely liar you are. I wouldn't be Mrs. Basil Gault for all the wealth in Memphis!"

"Of course, dear, the man was a precious scoundrel but he paid the price. He didn't deserve it, but I gave him the chance for a fair fight. He tried a dirty trick, as I told you, and when that failed he made short work of himself. We'll forget him, Barbara, shall we?"

Barbara Manton looked over the taffrail of the steamer that was bearing them from Alexandria, out over the wind-tossed waves. Yes, she would forget Robert Hassan, but not all at once. Her mind was too full of pictures for her to do that. Time, and time alone, could erase them. She lived over again the fight on the stairs at Limehouse, saw again the fog-shrouded Thames, felt again the hot breath of the master of El Bahar as he had taken her in his arms that night upon the balcony looking over the desert. . . . She put out a hand and found Basil's.

"Yes, Basil, we will forget. . . . Look over there at Jebel!"

Basil turned to where upon the deck, not many paces away, Jebel sat crouching over her little heaps of sand. Leaning against the rail Zelie watched her. Barbara rose and crossed the deck.

"Still telling the sands, Jebel?"

"Yes, madame."

"Mr. Gault has been telling me how Robert Hassan died, Jebel."

"Yes, madame."

"And what are the sands telling you now?"

The woman's eyes narrowed as she bent closer over her little heaps.

"I see a ruined temple, madame. There is water and over all a moon. Men are there . . . fighting. . . . Ah, monsieur . . ."

For Bertie Traverson had suddenly stepped forward, the sole of his canvas shoe scattering the sand far and wide. He shot a glance at Basil.

"Look here, Jebel, and you, too, Zelie. We've left Egypt behind us. Understand that. We're going to a land where these things don't count. Give me your bag, Jebel."

For a moment the eyes of Jebel flamed with resentment. Then Zelie leant forward and spoke a word in her mother's ear. Reluctantly Jebel did as she was bid. Taking the goat-skin bag she handed it to Traverson.

"But, monsieur, the sands of El Kabar . . . the sands that cannot lie . . ."

"They're not going to have the chance. This all you have, Jebel?"

"All."

Bertie Traverson walked to the rail and threw the bag over into the Mediterranean. He flicked aside the few grains that still lay upon the deck. Then he beamed through his monocle at Jebel.

"That's an end to all that nonsense, Jebel," he said, and turned on his heel and walked to where, stretched upon a deck-chair, Vera Peacock was waiting for him.

Barbara turned to Basil. "What a shame! You know, Basil, that woman was most wonderful with her sand pictures. It would have been interesting to have seen what took place on the island. You men are so reticent, so loath to blow your own trumpets."

The man turned aside and lit a cigarette. "Yes. It's a pity, isn't it?"

"And she might have told us where the Treasure of Memphis is, after all."

Basil took her hands in his. "Barbara," he said, "the Treasure of Memphis may stay where it is for ever. It probably will. The desert has swallowed up many a treasure in its day. It swallowed up mine. . . . And so, Barbara, now that it has given that treasure back to me the desert and myself are quits. That's all that matters."

He bent over the little hands and kissed them.

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THE END

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